

WILD WEST

WEEKLY

A MAGAZINE CONTAINING STORIES, SKETCHES Etc. OF WESTERN LIFE.

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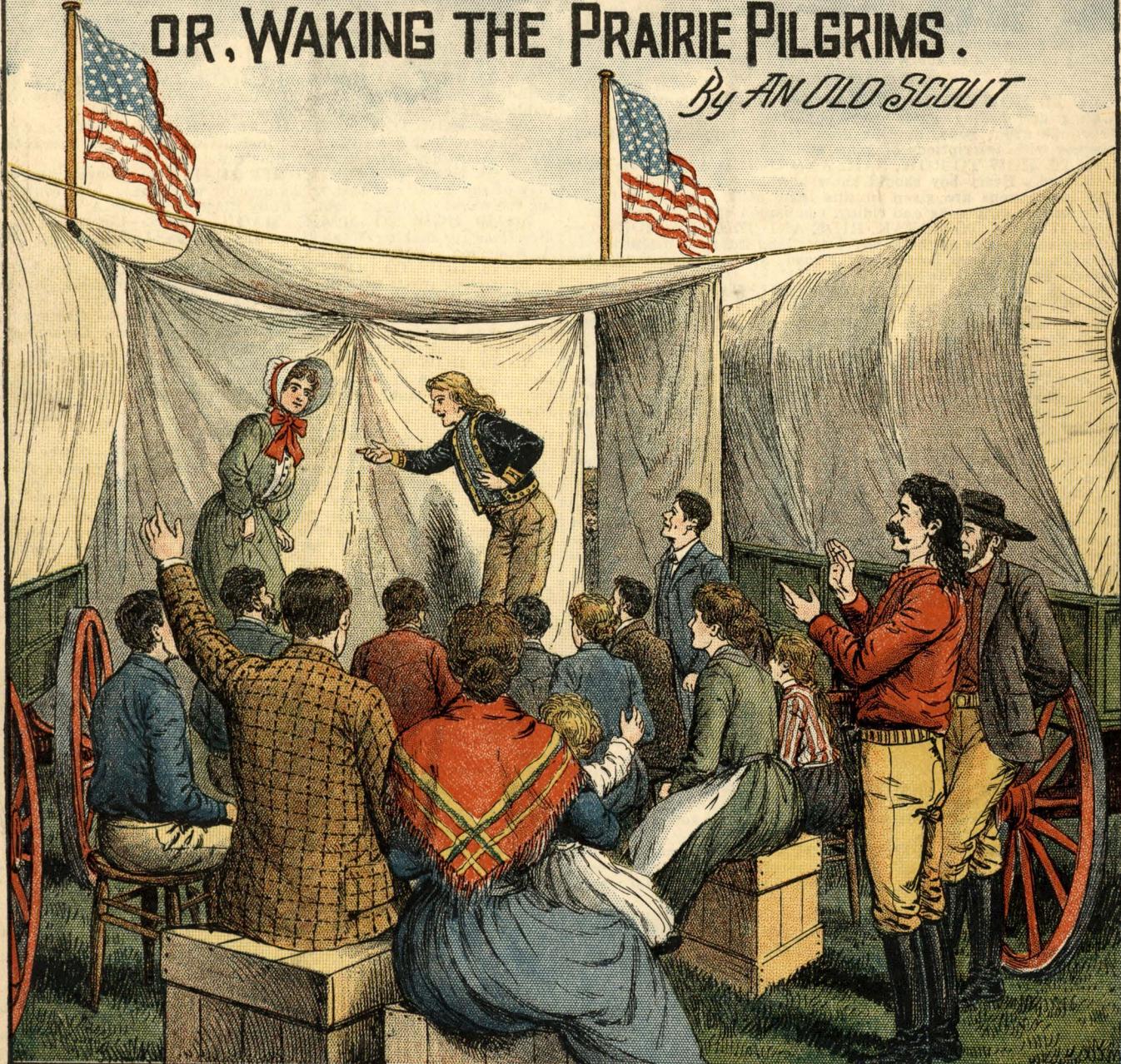
No. 79.

NEW YORK, APRIL 22, 1904.

Price 5 Cents.

YOUNG WILD WEST AND THE STRANDED SHOW OR, WAKING THE PRAIRIE PILGRIMS.

By AN OLD SCOUT



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YOUNG WILD WEST AND THE STRANDED SHOW

OR,

Waking the Prairie Pilgrims.

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CHAPTER I.

THE BALDWIN BROTHERS ARE SURPRISED.

Seated about a campfire one night in the month of May a few years ago was a rather dismal-looking party of four.

It was a wild-looking spot in Wyoming that they were camped in, and was just off the trail that led southward to Cheyenne, which was about fifty miles distant.

Two mules were grazing contentedly not far from the fire, and near to it a hay wagon was drawn up.

There were no horses to be seen, which fact told plainly that the four travelers had been riding in the vehicle.

This was about half loaded with a mixed lot of stuff that the casual observer would probably have declared to be worth little or nothing.

The four travelers had just finished a rather frugal supper, and they were now smoking their pipes and looking into the fire moody and thoughtful.

There was cause to make the men downhearted, for they were the promoters and backers of a show that had started on the road from Chicago four months before, and which had become stranded in Cheyenne three days previous to the opening of our story.

The quartette were joint owners of the show and all were actors—or they called themselves such, anyhow.

The hired members of the company had quit the show when the last performance given by it had failed to take in sufficient money to allow them enough to cover their board bill for the day at the hotel.

The four partners had acted honest with their employes,

for they had done their best to sell the scenery and other effects belonging to the show, declaring that the money should be divided equally among them, and that they would be willing to go broke.

But a customer could not be found, and the angered and disheartened actors had left the show to its fate.

The owners of the show were brothers—The Baldwin Brothers, they called themselves—and when they figured up their assets after they were left alone they found that they had just two dollars in money between them.

But each of them possessed a watch and chain and other jewelry, and this fact made them hopeful.

Watches and chains would sell more readily in Cheyenne than the paraphernalia of a third-class "fly-by-night" show.

So, after due deliberation, the Baldwin Brothers turned their jewelry into cash, and with the largest portion of the money purchased the mules and hay wagon, intending to strike for some other town and give a show in the open to see how it would work.

They had hopes of collecting enough from the crowd they would attract to pay expenses, and if they could do this they would keep it up until they had accumulated sufficient to pay their fares to Chicago.

It was quite a good scheme, but the showmen forgot that the towns in Wyoming were few and far between.

At the time of which we write it was hardly safe for travelers to pass over the trails that led over the mountains and plains, since bad Indians and lawless white men were scattered about plentifully and waiting to catch the unwary and relieve them of what money and valuables they possessed.

Some cowboys had told the men that there were lots of towns to the north of Cheyenne, but they had been traveling for a day and a half now, and they had failed to find one, or anything that looked like a town.

The cowboys had been joking with them, of course, but they had taken it for a fact.

"I wish we could find someone who would trade us four good saddle-horses for the outfit we have got," said the elder of the brothers, whose name was Perry.

"What would you do then?" asked Pierce, the youngest.

"Ride on till we struck a job on some ranch," was the reply. "It certainly looks as though we have got to get something to do, and that before long. We haven't struck a town yet, and it looks to me as though we won't very soon, for the further we have traveled the wilder the country has become."

"I am satisfied to strike a job on a ranch," said Hatfield, the next to the oldest.

"So am I!" exclaimed the remaining one, who was called John. "A good job, where I can get plenty of good grub to eat, is what I want. Suppose I get out the banjo and sing and play a little to put you fellows in a good humor? There is no use in our being down in the mouth! This is a big world, and there is a living in it for everybody."

"Except actors," added Pierce.

This brought a smile.

"Bum actors, why didn't you say," remarked Perry. "We must have run a bum show, or we wouldn't have become stranded like this. I just begin to realize that we're about the worst lot of actors that ever went out with a show."

"It is either that, or else the people don't know how to appreciate good talent," observed Hatfield.

This sort of talk got them into better spirits, and when the banjo had been brought from the wagon and the strains of the song they had heard so many times arose on the air, the three resolved that if it was not for John, life would be all the more wearisome to them.

The banjo player sat on a log and strummed away with as much energy as though he was playing before a crowded house. His voice, which was a fairly good one, arose clear and distinct and the echoes rang from the strip of woodland on the left of the camp.

But only one verse and the chorus had been rendered before a faint barking sounded near them.

It seems as though a hundred tiny terriers had all started in at once.

John ceased his singing and playing and sprang to his feet.

The Baldwin Brothers looked at each other in amazement.

"Now see what you've done!" said Pierce, grinning, but at the same time looking much mystified.

They had camped right near a prairie dog burrow, and the music had aroused the little animals.

The moon was just showing her face from behind the

distant hills, too, and that might have had something to do with bringing them out.

As it had been dark when the stranded showmen had halted and kindled their fire, they had not seen anything that looked like a burrow, or if they had it is doubtful if they would have known what it was.

They listened attentively, expecting every minute that a perfect horde of little dogs would appear.

But when this did not happen and they realized that the barking was no nearer to them, they concluded to investigate.

They each owned a revolver, as it was a necessary proceeding to go armed in that part of the country, as they had learned since they left Chicago.

In addition to drawing these, they each picked up a stick and started in the direction of the barking, which had lessened somewhat since the music stopped.

As they pushed their way through the bushes they saw a space just ahead of them which was covered with little hills.

On the top of each hill was a little animal that looked to be half dog, half squirrel.

They sat up on their haunches and barked away in piping tones as though they thoroughly enjoyed it.

John turned to his brothers with a laugh.

"What do you think of that?" he cried. "Who says I can't hold an audience when I do a turn? That is the greatest thing I ever saw."

"What are they, anyhow?" said Perry. "They look like a lot of rats gone plumb crazy."

Before any of them could offer any explanation the clatter of hoofs came to their ears.

"Someone's coming!" exclaimed Pierce. "Let's get back to the camp, for we can't tell whether they are friends or foes."

They had just reached the camp when a horseman dashed up and dismounted.

He was wildeyed and his horse was covered with foam.

"Hide me somewhere, strangers!" he cried hoarsely. "They're after me hot, an' they're goin' to hang me when they git me!"

The brothers were too much surprised to make an immediate reply, and without waiting for any, the fellow clambered into the wagon and crawled under some canvas.

He had hardly got out of sight when three more horsemen came up.

"Hello, thar, strangers!" bawled out a voice. "Where did ther skunk go to?"

The barking of the prairie dogs had ceased now and a stillness followed the question.

"Where did ther measly horse thief go?" shouted the man who had asked the question.

"Is he a horse thief?" asked Percy Baldwin.

"Yes, confound his hide! Where is he?"

"Well, he jumped off his horse and hid somewhere around here."

"We know he done that, but where did he hide?"

The brothers hesitated about answering, for they did

not want to be the means of sending a man to his death when they did not know but that he might be innocent.

But the three horsemen were desperate-looking fellows and armed to the teeth, as the saying goes, and when they leveled their shooters at the showmen the case was altered instantly.

"He's in the wagon!" said Hatfield quickly.

"I didn't steal ther nag, boys!" came in muffled tones from beneath the canvas. "You've made a mistake, as I told you afore I got away from you. I never even seen ther nag. I didn't steal him, I tell you!"

"We know better! Come out of that wagon an' git your medicine!"

The man in hiding refused to move, so the men quickly dismounted and surrounded the wagon.

In less than a minute they had seized him and dragged him out upon the ground.

The fellow was unarmed, or he would surely have made a fight for his life.

As it was, he could do nothing against the three of them.

They soon had his hands tied behind his back and his ankles bound together.

"We'll string him right up, boys!" said the man who seemed to be the leader of the trio. "Fetch a lariat!"

The lariat was forthcoming instantly.

"You tenderfeet kin look at ther show, but you mustn't interfere," went on the man, nodding to the four brothers. "We mean business, an' if you fellers try to stop us you'll git filled with lead! This galoot stole a horse from our camp, an' he's got to hang fur it!"

"I didn't steal the horse!" protested the man. "I never saw these men until they rode up and caught me about an hour ago. I was skinnin' a buffalo I'd shot, and I had no more idea of stealing a horse than I had of blowing out my own brains. If I stole the horse, where is it?"

"That's ther question—where is it?" said one of the men who were preparing him to be hung. "You turned ther nag loose when you heard us after you, that's what you done."

"I didn't! I——"

That was as far as he got, for the noose was placed about his neck and drawn tight just then.

Then the end of the lariat was thrown over a convenient limb and the victim was dragged upward and to a standing position.

"Hold on, men!" cried Pierce, the youngest of the Baldwin Brothers, stepping forward. "Don't hang that man until you are sure he is guilty. I am of the opinion that he is innocent! It is not right to hang him until you know."

"You stand back, Mr. Tenderfoot!" was the reply from the spokesman of the three. "If you've got a notion that you'd like to live a little longer, jest stand back an' keep your mouth shet! You kin look, but you mustn't touch! D'ye understand that?"

The rope had slackened a trifle while this was being said

and the prisoner had regained the use of his tongue for a second.

"I'm innocent!" he cried. "I'm innocent! Don't——"

"Up with him, boys!" cried the man who held the end of the rope. "Now, then! Up with him!"

So interested had they all been that they did not hear the approach of a horseman, who dashed up and came to a halt right in their very midst just as the three men were about to launch the accused into eternity.

"Let go of that lariat, you cowardly hounds, or I will drop every one dead in your tracks, as sure as my name is Young Wild West!" was the ringing command.

CHAPTER II.

BUYS THE EFFECTS OF THE STRANDED SHOW.

If a thunderbolt had struck in their midst the men could not have been taken more by surprise.

They let go the rope that they were about to hang their prisoner with and glanced in silent amazement at the speaker.

He was nothing more than a boy in looks and years, but when it came to courage, strength and daring, he was every inch a man—a man in the true sense.

The trio of rough-looking men who were so anxious to put an end to the fellow they called a horse thief seemed to realize this.

And the Baldwin Brothers were so surprised and delighted at the sudden turn of affairs that they stood still in their tracks and looked in mute admiration at the dashing young horseman who had stopped the hanging.

With a wealth of chestnut hair hanging to his shoulders and pearl-colored sombrero tipped well back on his head, the face beneath it showed off to the best advantage.

It was a handsome one—remarkably handsome, we might say—and every line of it betokened coolness and determination.

There was a dangerous flash in the dark eyes that were looking so steadily at the trio, and the hands that held a brace of revolvers leveled at them were as steady as a rock.

"Young Wild West!" cried the prisoner, joyfully.

"Yes, it is me, Rick," was the calm reply. "You stayed so long after dark that I started out to look for you. I heard the clattering of hoofs and then I rode up to see what was going on. I was not sure that you was the man who was being chased, but I was certain someone was, and I resolved to see about it. I got here just in time, I guess. Cut that man loose!"

The last remark was adddressed to the three men.

"He's a horse thief!" said one of them.

"No, he isn't!" was the quick reply. "I know better than that."

"But he took one of our horses an' went off with it," persisted the man.

"I didn't, Wild!" said the prisoner. "I never seen these fellers till they caught me an' took my shooters an' knife away from me. They caught ther wrong man when they got me."

"Oh! I believe you, Rick. Come! Hurry up, you fellows, and release him."

The trio muttered some words between them and then obeyed.

Evidently they did not want to let the man go, but they were too much afraid of Young Wild West to refuse.

He had the drop on them!

As they severed the ropes that bound him and removed the noose from about his neck the showmen gave a unanimous sigh of relief.

"Rick, get your weapons," said Young Wild West.

One of the men promptly handed them to him.

"Now," resumed the boy, still keeping his eyes on them, "you fellows can mount and go and look for the man who stole your horse. Move on, now! I can't say that I fancy the looks of either of you. If I had had a horse stolen and came upon either of you fellows I would surely think that I had found the thief. Move on!"

Sullenly the three walked to their horses and mounted. Then they turned and rode off into the darkness.

"Now, my friends, I would like to ask you what you are doing here?" Young Wild West remarked, looking curiously at the four actors and their traveling outfit.

"We are all that's left of a stranded show," answered the elder of the brothers.

"A stranded show, eh? Well, that seems rather queer. What are you doing away out here on the prairies? You can't very well give a show here."

"They could give a show here all right, I reckon," said the rescued man who had been called Rick by the dashing boy. "This would be an all right place to give a show, but I reckon there wouldn't be many come to see it."

In spite of his thrilling experience, the man was now perfectly at his ease, and he laughed heartily at his joke.

The Baldwin Brothers were pretty keen observers, and they had taken to Young Wild West from the very moment he spoke.

They saw in him a friend.

John started in to relate the story of how they had come to be stranded and Young Wild West and Rick listened.

The actor put a little humor in the story, and that made it go all the better.

When he had finished Young Wild West said to them:

"Well, what do you say if you hitch up your mules and drive over to our camp? It isn't more than three miles from here, and it is a better place, too. There are no prairie dogs there to bark at you, either, so you can sing and play to your hearts' content."

"What do you say?" asked John, turning to his brothers.

They showed a unanimous desire to accept the invitation.

"I reckon you'd better go," spoke up the rescued prisoner. "If them fellers what had me took a notion they

might come back here an' make it hot fur you. In my opinion, they're nothin' more than renegades, anyhow."

"Oh! we will be only too glad to go!" cried the elder brother. "It won't take us but a very few minutes to get ready."

Young Wild West and Rick waited for them, and when they had hitched the mules to the wagon they all set out across the level stretch of prairie.

In less than fifteen minutes they reached a camp in a little grove of cedars that was near a running stream.

Two tents were erected just back of the blazing fire that threw out a light in all directions.

The four actors were surprised when they saw that there were females in the camp.

But there was really nothing surprising in this, for Young Wild West was on his way to Fort Bridger, and, as in many cases, his sweetheart was accompanying him.

There were just ten in the party.

Young Wild West and his sweetheart, Arietta Murdock; Cheyenne Charlie and his wife, Anna; Jim Dart and his sweetheart, Eloise Gardner; Sam Murdock, the grandfather of Arietta; Lively Rick, who hailed from a mining camp called Devil Creek, and two servants, a negro and a Chinaman.

The party had started from Weston, where Young Wild West and his partners had mines and other interests, for Fort Bridger, where Sam Murdock was going to settle up some real estate business.

Wild and his two partners, Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart, delighted in making such trips on horseback across the mountains and plains, and when they went out they usually met with lots of stirring adventures.

That evening at sunset, as they had decided upon camping where they now were, Lively Rick had ridden off to the right to try and get a shot at a small herd of buffaloes he had sighted.

He had remained away so long after it became dark that Young Wild West, who, by the way, was known as the Prince of the Saddle and Champion Deadshot of the West, started out to look for him.

He found him just in the nick of time, as has been described.

Rick told his story at the camp, after the Baldwin Brothers had been made acquainted with all hands.

Summed up briefly, it was as follows:

He had succeeded in dropping one of the buffaloes, and was skinning it in the quickly gathering darkness, when he had been pounced upon by three men, who had dismounted and crept upon him under cover of the grass and gathering darkness.

Then what has been described took place.

It was the first real excitement that any of the party had been subjected to since leaving Weston in the Black Hills, and all voted that Lively Rick had a narrow escape.

Cheyenne Charlie looked questioningly at the four brothers while the part they had played in the incident was being told.

"You fellers was afraid to tackle ther three measly coyotes, I reckon?" he said.

"Yes," answered Perry, "to tell the truth, we were. It was all so surprising that we could not think of just what to do, and when they pointed their revolvers at us we felt that we had better let them have their own way."

"Oh I don't blame them fellers," spoke up Lively Rick. "They was taken at a big disadvantage, an', besides, they are only tenderfeet, an' not up to our ways, you know."

"I think the Baldwin Brothers can be excused, Charlie, under the circumstances," spoke up Young Wild West. "They are in the hardest kind of hard luck, so they say, and to be surprised, as they were, first by the prairie dogs and then by Rick riding up and jumping into their wagon, it is no wonder that they knew not just what to do when the three men appeared and demanded to know where their intended victim was. It has turned out all right, anyhow, so don't let us blame anybody."

"If we had half the nerve you have got, an' knew anything about handling a pistol, I guess we would have stopped them from taking hold of the man, let alone hanging him," spoke up the younger of the brothers.

"Well, I reckon you'll learn something afore you've been out in this country very long," said Cheyenne Charlie, as he brushed back his long black hair with one hand and stroked his handsome drooping mustache with the fingers of the other. "I was born an' brought up in ther Wild West, you see, an' it always seems funny to me when a man don't pull his gun when anything like that happens."

"I suppose we will learn a whole lot," young Baldwin admitted. "We have already learned something, which is, that it is mighty hard to sell the paraphernalia of a stranded show."

"You really want to sell the stuff, then?" queried Young Wild West, looking at the men.

"Sell it!" they echoed. "Yes."

"How much do you want for it?"

"Sufficient money to pay our way to Chicago from Cheyenne. It cost four times that amount, and the scenery is in pretty good condition. There are sets there for 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' 'Romeo and Juliet' and 'Hamlet.' The costumes alone are worth two hundred dollars."

"All right; I'll buy the outfit for what you ask for it, and give you each a horse in the bargain. You can sell the horses when you get to Cheyenne, and the money they bring will give you a neat little surplus."

The four brothers looked at each other in amazement. They could scarcely believe their senses.

"Do you mean that, sir?" the younger of them managed to ask.

"Mean it? Why, certainly I do. I never say anything unless I mean it. Now, how much is the fare to Cheyago?"

They quickly told him the exact cost.

"All right. I will give you a draft on the Express Bank at Cheyenne for the amount. Then you can take the horses our two servants have been riding and the two

pack-horses we have with us. They are broken to the saddle."

"But what will you do, then?" asked John.

"Do? Why, won't we have the mules and the hay wagon? I guess the wagon will easily accommodate the Chinaman and the darky and all the stuff the pack-horses have been carrying. Do? Well, I think we will be fitted out very nicely."

"Well, if you are satisfied, we are more than satisfied. But you had better look over what you are buying, so you will not be deceived any."

"I'll take the outfit just as it is. If I am stuck it is my fault, not yours."

"All right, then. It is yours. The property effects of the stranded show is yours, Young Wild West."

"Good! I may have a whole lot of fun with that stuff before we get to Fort Bridger. Who knows?"

Wild's pretty golden-haired sweetheart appeared to be delighted at the purchase.

"We can start a show of our own," she said to her female companions.

"You would make the leading lady well enough," retorted Anna. "And Eloise knows all about the show business, as she traveled with one for a long time before she came to Weston."

"Never mind about me for the leading lady. I never attempted anything in the line of acting in my life. But what you say about Eloise is all right. She knows all about the business."

"Well, I will admit that I know a great deal about it," spoke up the rather delicate girl, who was the sweetheart of Jim Dart, the boy who was generally known as the chum of Young Wild West.

While the girls were talking Young Wild West made out the draft and got a receipt from the Baldwin Brothers.

The stranded showmen were joyous at their great luck, and they were unanimous in declaring that when they got back to Chicago they would never start out on the road with a show again.

They remained at the camp over night, and the next morning, mounted on the four horses given them by Young Wild West, they headed for Cheyenne, after bidding all hands a hearty farewell.

"Well," said our hero, turning to his companions, when the men had disappeared from view, "we are always striking queer things, it seems, but this about knocks any of them out so far. Here I have gone and purchased the effects of a stranded show. Now, the question is, what are we going to do with the things?"

No one offered a suggestion, so the boy said:

"Well, I will tell you what we will do with them. We will call ourselves the Stranded Show, and we will Wake the Prairie Pilgrims on our way to Fort Bridger!"

"Hooray for Young Wild West an' ther Stranded Show!" cried Cheyenne Charlie, waving his sombrero in the air.

The cheers were given with a will.

CHAPTER III.

THE SEXTETTE OF VILLAINS.

We will now follow the three men who had been cheated of hanging Lively Rick.

A horse had really been stolen from them, and it is quite probable that they thought they had found the right man when they came upon Rick.

Still, as they had failed to find the missing horse in his possession, they should have given him the benefit of the doubt.

But they were not the sort of men to give much of a show to anyone.

They were out-and-out villains, and when Young Wild West declared that he would unhesitatingly brand them as horse thieves if he had lost a horse and met them, he was hitting hard on facts.

The villains bore the names of Red Romer, Dan Gizzard and McGinnis.

Red Romer was the acknowledged leader of them, and it was he who had done the most of the talking when they were going to hang Lively Rick.

As they rode away the three villains were rather disgruntled.

"That's what I calls bein' interfered with fur fair!" observed the one called McGinnis.

"You bet it was!" answered Dan Gizzard. "That feller was only a boy, but he took all the starch out of me, jest ther same."

"A very nervy sort of a rooster, he was," declared Red Romer. "He said as how his name was Young Wild West, an' I think I've heard that name afore."

"Well, you kin jest bet that I'm goin' to git square on him fur interferin' with us, if we ever git ther chance," said the first speaker.

"Oh! we'll git a chance, most likely. We come out of town to try our luck on ther trail, an' ther chances are that ther boy has got someone with him that ain't quite as sharp as he is. We must wait for 'em, an' then sorter give 'em a surprise."

The three rode off to a little hollow that was less than two miles from the spot where our hero and his friends were camped.

They had left a fire burning between two logs and it was still smouldering.

Dismounting, they took the saddles and bridles from their steeds and tied them where they had a good chance to graze upon the luxuriant grass that grew there in plenty.

"We must be up at daylight in ther mornin'," said the leader of the trio.

"We want to find Young Wild West, you know, an' like as not we might run across ther feller what took ther extra horse we had to-night."

"You don't think it was ther skunk we had, then?" asked McGinnis.

"No! I reckon we had ther wrong man. I kinder

thought so when he swore it wasn't him, but I knew we had to have satisfaction on someone, an' it was better to lynch him than no one."

"That's so!" and the two villains nodded, as much as to say they thoroughly agreed with him.

After talking the matter over for some time they at length turned in.

They did not deem it necessary to keep a watch, and so all three of them went to sleep.

It was quite considerable after midnight when Red Romer was awakened by hearing the sharp neigh of a horse.

He was a practiced plainsman, anyhow, and he was up in a twinkling.

The moon was just going down, and, looking over to where the horses were tied, he was surprised to see a fourth one there. A lariat was trailing from it, too, and it did not take him more than a second to see that it was the one they had come so near to hanging Lively Rick for.

As soon as Red Romer made certain of this he awoke his companions.

"Ther horse has come back," he said. "I reckon no one didn't steal him, after all. He must have got ther lariat untied."

"That's so," said McGinnis.

"I guess I'll go an' catch him an' make him good an' fast this time," spoke up Gizzard, and he hastened off to do so.

He had no trouble in catching the horse, and when he had tied it along with the others he came back.

"He must have strayed off a putty good ways, too," he remarked. "Well, I'm glad we've got him, 'cause he might come in handy. We may be able to sell him to some wagon train."

"That's what's ther matter!" exclaimed Red Romer. "It don't make no difference if we did find ther critter where he wasn't lost, he's ours by rights."

The fact was that the three villains had stolen the horse in Cheyenne.

They had found him wandering about near the outskirts of the town, saddled and bridled waiting for a rider.

They could not let such a chance slip, for there was too much rascality in them for that.

That was why they were so enraged when they thought that someone had stolen the animal from them.

If the real owner came along and had enough men at his back to put in a claim that was persuasive, they meant to let him have the horse and say that they had found it wandering about, and had simply caught it to wait for the owner to come along.

The three men turned in again and slept till daylight.

Then they got up and took a look around over the prairie.

As they were in a little hollow, they could not see very far, so McGinnis climbed a tree and made a survey.

It was not long before he caught sight of the camp of our friends.

The tents were easily distinguishable, and so was the hay wagon he had seen at the camp of the four men the night before.

He came down the tree and reported to his two companions.

They concluded not to make a fire that morning, but to eat a breakfast of cold bear meat, and then wait till those who were camped so near them set out for where they were bound.

When they finally saw four men ride away from the camp and head in the direction of Cheyenne they did not know what to make of it.

"Them looks like ther fellers what had ther mules an' ther wagon," observed McGinnis.

"They do, fur a fact," retorted Red Romer.

"That's just who they are, too!" exclaimed Dan Gizzard, half a minute later. "I kin tell by ther way they're dressed. They're tenderfeet, fur sure. Just look at ther way they ride."

"That's right!" and the other two nodded.

Ten minutes later they saw the camp breaking up.

Not long after Young Wild West and his friends started off in a westerly direction.

The three villains were surprised when they saw three females in the party.

"I wonder where they're bound?" Red Romer remarked.

"It's hard to tell," replied McGinnis. "I reckon it would pay us to foller on behind 'em, though. It may be that we kin git a chance to make a haul out of ther gang."

"If we're real careful we might. Well, we'll jest jog along in that direction, anyhow. I wonder what it is that's in that wagon?"

"I don't know," and the other two shook their heads.

They waited until our friends had got a good two miles start, and then they rode over until they came to the trail and rode along in their wake.

That night they halted a little over a mile from them and pitched their camp right on the open prairie.

After dark they dug a hole in the ground and heaped up the dirt, so they could build a small fire behind it and not have the blaze seen.

They cooked their supper then, after which they prepared to take things easy for awhile and study out a plan how they could do something to get square on Young Wild West for interfering with them the night before.

They had been in camp about an hour, when they heard the sounds made by horses' hoofs.

Someone was coming along the trail.

The villains looked rather uneasy, for they had an idea that the owner of the stolen horse was making his appearance.

The next minute two horses came up.

One of them had two men on its back.

The other carried a rider, who was quite plainly a half-breed Indian.

"Hello, strangers!" the latter called out. "Any objections to our stoppin' with you over night?"

"None at all," answered Red Romer.

"We're in a little hard luck, an' we're putty well tired out," went on the halfbreed. "We had a little scrimmage to-day an' lost a horse from a bullet."

"Is that so?" asked the leader of the trio. "Well, mebbe we kin help you out a little in that line. We've got an extra horse."

"The dickens you have!"

The three strangers now dismounted, and it did not take Red Romer and his companions half a minute to see that they were a hard-looking set.

All of them had Indian blood in their veins, beyond the shadow of a doubt, and they had the appearance of having been in a recent fight.

One rogue can generally tell another.

And so it was in this case.

They had not talked more than ten minutes before they understood each other pretty well.

Though a little slow about admitting that they were out for the purpose of preying upon their fellow-creatures, they let it out after awhile.

Then Red Romer told the strangers that they had been following the trail of Young Wild West's party, and that they had been figuring on a way to get square with him for interfering with their business the night before.

The halfbreed, who was plainly the dominating spirit of the newcomers, stated that they had lost their horse in a fight with a wagon train which was heading that way.

"We tried to steal a few things from one of ther wagons," he said, "an' they caught us. We'd been taken in as friends by 'em, but they turned ag'in us mighty sudden when they found what we was up to an' ordered us to git out. We started, but had some words with a couple of 'em. Then we began to shoot, hopin' to down some of 'em an' git away. But we didn't hit 'em, an' ther first thing we knowed one of our horses went under. Then we got away as fast as we could. This happened about an hour afore sunset, and here we are, ready to jine in with you fellers an' do some business."

"Good enough!" cried McGinnis. "I reckon six kin do a lot more than three, any day!"

The halfbreed gave his name as Sim Dusty and his friends were Hammer and Speck.

It was now truly a sextette of villains that had got together, and it was the extra horse that sealed the bonds of friendship.

"You say they got women with ther gang that's camped ahead of us?" questioned Sim Dusty.

"Yes," answered Red Romer.

"An' it ain't no regular wagon train?"

"No."

"A curious sort of an outfit, then, ain't it?"

"Yes, but it is Young Wild West's gang. I have heard a little about him. He goes all over ther country, an' sometimes he takes some gals with him. He's a deadshot, they say, but we know fur a fact that he's one of ther coolest fellers that ever drawed a shootin' iron."

"Well, if he ever tackles me I reckon he'll find that he's met his match," remarked the halfbreed. "I'm jest

about as cool as they make 'em, an' when it comes to shootin' a gun quick, I reckon I'm right than every time."

"Well, I'm glad that you're that kind of a feller. I'm a good one myself, but this boy took me by surprise last night, an' he made me come down to him, too."

"Wait till I git a chance at him."

"Well, you kin depend on me to help you. S'pose you an' me takes a little scout around their camp an' see how they've got things fixed there?"

"Just what I was goin' to propose."

"Come on, then. Ther rest of ther gang kin stay here."

"How will we go, on foot?"

"Yes, that will be ther best."

Without any further talk the two set out to pay a visit to the close vicinity of Young Wild West's camp.

They hurried along until they got within a couple of hundred yards of the campfire and then came to a halt.

They could see well enough to count those who were there, but not plain enough to suit them exactly.

Sim Dusty whispered that he was going closer, and he at once started to do so.

There was much laughing and talk going on at the camp, so the villain did not deem it necessary to be very cautious.

But that was where he made a big mistake.

When he got within fifty yards of the camp a tall form suddenly appeared before him and a voice exclaimed:

"Hold up your hands, you measly coyote!"

CHAPTER IV.

PREPARING FOR THE SHOW.

When Young Wild West and his companions resumed their journey that morning everybody was in a good humor and a state of expectancy.

Ike, the darky, was appointed to drive the mules, and with Wing Wah, the Chinaman, at his side, the wagon was certainly worth looking at.

"It is going to make us a little longer in getting at our destination," said Wild. "But probably we will have enough fun out of it to pay for it. To-night we will make an examination of the costumes and scenery and arrange to give a performance."

This made all hands eager for the night to come.

Cheyenne Charlie and Lively Rick shot some game that morning, so they were bound to have fresh meat for a day or two.

They were well supplied with everything else in the line of provisions, and our hero figured out that they would have sufficient to last them, even if they were a day or two longer in getting to Fort Bridger.

The day passed without anything worthy of note happening, and about an hour before sunset they came to a halt in a convenient group of trees on the prairie and went into camp.

Anna and the girls helped Wing Wah to get the ready, as they wanted to hurry things along, so they get at the costumes and scenery of the show.

As soon as they had all eaten, Wild went to the wagon and started to make an examination of the things.

It was not dark yet, and they had a good chance to see how the scenery looked in the daylight.

None of them were greatly impressed with it as they looked at one piece after another, but when they came to the costumes they were rather pleased.

Among the properties were books of several plays and recitations, but when Wild looked them over he declared that when they gave a show it must be an original one.

"We will make up things as we go along," he said. "We will pick out our costumes and then rehearse over something that will suit. We can do it to-night, if you are all willing."

Of course they were—at least all but Cheyenne Charlie.

He declared that he was not born to be an actor, and that he would be one of the spectators when they gave a show.

It was finally decided that Wild, Jim, Arietta, Anna, Eloise and Ike, the darky, should be the performers, and that Lively Rick should be property man and take charge of the curtain.

The scout was going to be the audience, along with the Chinaman.

It did not take Young Wild West long to figure out the ground-work of a good sketch, and when he had laid it down to the rest of them they got to thinking over suitable lines for it.

The costumes they had would answer fire-rate for anything they might want to impersonate.

When it got dark Charlie left the rest to talk over the proposed show and took a walk around the outskirts of the camp.

He was to stand watch during the early part of the night, and though he did not anticipate any real danger, he thought it best to be on the watch.

He made the rounds once and then came back, looking pleased when he saw the interest his wife was taking in the stranded show.

After awhile he concluded to make another circle around the camp, and he set out to do it.

He got something like a hundred yards from the fire before he started around, and when he had completed about half the circle he suddenly heard a noise off to his right.

He happened to be in the shadow of a tree at the time, so he remained perfectly still and listened.

At first he thought it was some prowling wild beast, but when he heard low whispers he knew better.

"Some measly coyotes are sneakin' up to have a look at our camp, are they?" he thought. "Well, I reckon they'll git a surprise, all right."

The whispering soon died out, but Charlie had heard enough to prove to him that two or more persons were crawling toward the camp.

Dropping to the ground, he began working his way noiselessly toward the place where he figured the prowlers were heading for.

He kept right on without pausing to listen until he had reached a point within fifty yards of the campfire.

The scout had calculated well, for when he came to a stop he heard something moving within a few feet of him.

He was lying right on his stomach at the time, and the next instant when he saw the form of a man creeping along he decided to bring him to with a round turn.

Then it was that he sprang to his feet and covered the prowler, who was Sim Dusty, the halfbreed, as has been stated.

At the command to hold up his hands, Dusty leaped forward and dove between the scout's legs, upsetting him.

But when he went down Charlie made a grab with his left hand and seized the villain by his right arm.

Sim Dusty was brought to with a jerk and he rolled over on the ground.

Then Charlie was on him like a shot.

"I've got you, you measly coyote!" he exclaimed. "Now, then, jest give an account of yourself, or off goes ther top of your head!"

"Let me up!" came the reply. "I am a friend, if you are an honest man."

"Well, if you're a friend, what are you sneakin' around our camp like this for?" and the scout's revolver was thrust against the villain's temple.

"How did I know what kind of people you was—I don't know yet? I'm a hunter an' a friend to everybody what's honest."

"Well, I'll take your shooters from you, an' then you kin come to ther camp with me, an' we'll see if you are. You'd better tell ther feller who was whisperin' to you a little while ago to come with you."

"I wasn't whisperin' to anyone. I has a way of talkin' to myself, an' it has got me in trouble more than once."

The scout did not believe this.

He had been keeping a sharp watch for someone else to appear while he held the revolver to the fellow's head.

As he had been talking loud enough for those at the camp to hear him, Red Romer also heard him.

But when he saw Young Wild West was hastening to the spot, Red Romer concluded that he had better get away.

He did so, making headway as fast as he dared to.

"I caught this feller sneakin' around, Wild," said the scout, as our hero appeared. "There's another one right close by."

"No, there ain't!" spoke up the halfbreed. "I was talkin' to myself, an' he thinks there was someone with me. I seen your fire, an' I thought I'd creep up an' see what kind of lookin' fellers you are. I had a right to do that, I reckon. I ain't supposed to take it fur granted that everyone is honest, am I?"

"No, you are not," answered Wild. "But come on! You shall see our camp and all who belong to it. Then you will be satisfied, I suppose."

"Well, I don't object to takin' a look," said Sim Dusty, who was certainly a pretty cool hand and one who was quick at forming conclusions and giving answers. "I don't object to you fellers takin' a look at our camp, either. There's six of us altogether, an' we're a peaceful lot. We're on our way to Fort Bridger."

Wild and Charlie conducted the prowler direct to the camp.

When he got in the light they quickly saw that he was not a full-blooded white man.

"What's your name?" asked our hero.

"Simeon Dusty," was the reply.

"You are a halfbreed?"

"Yes. My father was a white man from ther state of Vermont and my mother was a Chipewa squaw. But I'm an honest man, for all that."

"I don't know as there is any reason why you shouldn't be. But to be plain with you, Simeon Dusty, I don't like your looks. I have an idea that you are a man who would kill a person for a small sum of money, providing you thought you would not be caught. I always tell a man just what I think of him, you know, and I very seldom get fooled."

"You're sayin' hard things ag'in me, young feller. There ain't no cause fur you to talk that way, either."

"Never mind, now. Just take a look at our camp, as you were so anxious to get near enough to see it. Now, are you satisfied?"

"Oh! I didn't want to see it particularly. I only wanted to find out whether you people was friends or foes. I found out enough to suit me, I reckon."

"All right, then. Charlie, give him his weapons and face him in the direction he came from."

The scout did so.

"Now, you must make a run for it, Simeon Dusty. When I count three I want you to light out as though a grizzly was chasing you, and take care that you do not come sneakin' around any camp of ours again. One, two, three!"

Away went the halfbreed like a youngster on a hundred-yards dash.

He was heartily glad to get away so easy, but he was boiling with anger, too.

The fact of his having been called such bad names by a person who had never seen him before was sufficient to make him feel like killing Young Wild West.

"I'm certain there was another feller with him," said Cheyenne Charlie. "Their whisperin' was what I heard first."

"There is no doubt of it," spoke up Jim Dart. "The fellow never spoke a word of truth, in my opinion."

"Well, I took notice that he was not one of the three who were going to hang Rick," said Wild. "There seems to be a lot of rascals hanging about this trail. We will have to be on the watch, for if a number of them were to get together they might take it in their heads to make a try at robbing us."

"I reckon it will take quite a lot of 'em to do it," observed the scout, smiling grimly.

As they did not know just how many there were in the gang Sim Dusty belonged to, Wild thought it advisable to have two on guard.

So he put the Chinaman on with Charlie for the first three hours.

Then he would take Ike, the darky, and go on for the second watch, while Jim and Lively Rick would finish the night.

The night passed without any further trouble.

As soon as it was daylight Jim took a scout around and soon located the six villains.

As he had not seen the three who had been going to hang Lively Rick, he, of course, could not recognize any of them but the halfbreed.

Jim managed to get back to the camp without being seen by the men, and when Wild awoke a few minutes later he reported what he had seen.

"Six of them, eh? Well, that's good! I guess they won't bother us a great deal," and the boy gave a nod of satisfaction.

"But they will bear watching, just the same," said Jim.

"Oh, of course! That halfbreed is a treacherous fellow, and I will bet on it. But he had better steer clear of this camp, though!"

It was a little after seven when they started out again, and they had scarcely got in motion when Wild and Jim took a ride back to see what the six men were up to.

When they found they did not meet them they were not a little surprised, for they were both quite confident that they meant to follow them.

They kept on in that direction, however, knowing full well that they could easily overtake their companions on account of the slowness of the mule team.

Just as they reached the place where the villains had camped over night they were surprised to see a wagon train approaching. There were about a dozen of the old-fashioned prairie schooners in it, and the horses and cattle must have numbered in the neighborhood of a hundred.

"Well," observed our hero, "here comes company for us, if we want it. Jim, those six rascals must have made for the timber over yonder, probably with the intention of getting ahead of us."

"That's what I would say, unless they went back and joined the wagon train."

"Well, they might have done that, and if they have it is our duty to warn the Prairie Pilgrims of them."

"Well, let's ride on and meet the train, then."

"All right."

They started their horses forward on a gallop and soon met the advance guard of the train.

Then, much to the satisfaction of Young Wild West, he found the guide in charge of the train was an old acquaintance.

"Why, how are you, Jack Speed?" he called out, as he rode up and came to a halt.

"Blamed if it ain't Young Wild West!" was the reply. "How are you, Wild? And how are you, Jim Dart?"

There was a hearty handshake and then the guide was asked where he was bound.

"To Fort Bridger," was the reply. "These are Prairie Pilgrims on their way to pick out farmin' land an' settle down."

CHAPTER V.

THE SHOW BEGINS.

When Young Wild West told Jack Speed, the guide, that he was going to Fort Bridger, too, and that old man Sam Murdock was ahead with the rest of the party, the guide was much elated.

He was well acquainted with the grandfather of Arietta, and also Cheyenne Charlies, the famous scout.

"I reckon you'd better join right in with us people," he said. "It will be a little slower travelin', but that oughtn't to make a great deal of difference."

"Not so much slower, either," spoke up Jim Dart. "We have got a mule wagon in our outfit."

"Is that so? Well, then, I reckon you'll go right along with us."

Wild and Jim had turned their horses and they were riding along with the guide and the others who were in advance of the wagon train.

The guide introduced his companions in his rough way and they all seemed very glad to have met Young Wild West.

"Have you seen anything of six men this morning, one of them a halfbreed?" our hero asked them.

"No," was the reply, "but we had a little trouble with three galoots yesterday, though. One of 'em was a halfbreed named Sim Dusty."

"Ah?" exclaimed Jim Dart. "That is the fellow."

"So there were only three of them, then?" questioned our hero.

"Yes. They met us an' asked if they could ride along with us. We let 'em, of course, an' everything went all right till we found 'em tryin' to steal somethin' out of ther wagons. Then we give 'em orders to light out, but they got sassy an' we had a little trouble with 'em. One of their horses got shot in ther scrimmage."

"I knew that halfbreed was no good!" exclaimed Wild. "Well, if there were only three of them, there are six now. They were camped right above here, and they must have lit out early this morning. The chances are that they went over to the timber and are riding fast to get ahead of us."

"Well, ther next time they show up around us they'll git somethin' they don't want. We've decided on that."

After a little further talk about the rascals Wild and Jim rode back with the guide and were introduced to the men, women and children who were on their way to Fort Bridger.

They all seemed pleased when Jack Speed declared that Young Wild West was the greatest deadshot of the West, and that he had the fastest horse a man had ever mounted upon.

After staying in the company of the Prairie Pilgrims, as they chose to call themselves, for about half an hour, Wild and Jim rode on ahead to halt their friends and allow the train to catch up with them.

Cheyenne Charlie and Sam Murdock were pleased when they heard that they were to join the crowd that Jack Speed was leading over the prairie to Fort Bridger.

And the girls were also pleased and did some whispering among themselves.

"What are you people talking about?" asked Wild, as he noticed this.

"We were thinking that we would now be able to have an audience when we give a show," replied Arietta.

"That's so! It is a good thing that the wagon train happened along. I never thought about it before. The fact that we were running a stranded show never entered my mind before."

"Whoopie!" cried Lively Rick. "I'm jest itchin' to see ther show an' git to handlin' ther curtain, lettin' it up an' down when ther bell rings."

The outfit was brought to a halt, and after some little time the prairie schooners reached them.

It did not take them long to become acquainted.

The emigrants were nearly all Westerners, who had decided to go a little further beyond the bounds of civilization and try their luck.

There were nearly a dozen girls of about the age of Arietta and Eloise, and this made it pleasant for them.

Then there were perhaps twenty women, who were the wives of hardy pioneers, and several boys almost grown, besides smaller children.

Before the day passed our friends had become so well acquainted with the Prairie Pilgrims that it seemed as though they had known them from the start of the wagon train.

As might be supposed, Arietta, Anna and Eloise soon got it noised among the women that they proposed to give a show.

Few of them had ever seen a show, so they were eager to see it, as might be supposed.

When the men got hold of it they were just as anxious for the show to be given as their wives, daughters and sweethearts were.

So, when pressed pretty hard, Wild decided that they would try it the next morning.

He found that they could not very well do it in the night-time, owing to the absence of light.

They took the usual precautions in going into camp that night, for they never could tell when they might be attacked by some roving band of Indians or white renegades.

They were wise in doing this, too, for shortly after midnight a fierce yell broke the stillness, followed instantly by the discharge of firearms.

The camp had been attacked.

Young Wild West was as much surprised as the rest, for he had hardly supposed that a band large enough to cope with them was anywhere about.

But he was equal to the emergency, however.

"Lie low and wait till you see them before you fire a shot!" was the word he passed among the men.

Jack Speed, the guide, was quick to impress it upon the minds of the men that they should do just as our hero told them.

The yell that had preceded the firing was plainly made by Indians, and our friends knew it.

After the first volley a silence reigned.

The attacking party did not charge the prairie schooners, which were drawn up in a circle.

They were probably waiting for a return volley.

A minute passed.

Then another yell sounded and a number of indistinct figures were seen moving toward the camp through the darkness.

"Give it to them, boys, and make every shot tell!" cried Young Wild West.

He fired as he spoke, and a death yell rang out.

Before the echoes of it had died away a volley sounded and at least a dozen of the approaching figures dropped to the ground to rise no more.

Then several shots were fired from the other side, and one of the men inside the circle fell.

Wild quickly darted over and crept under one of the wagons.

He caught sight of several forms moving along close to the ground.

Crack!

The sharp report of his rifle rang out.

Then all was still.

He waited for a minute and then he saw something moving away from the spot.

Crack!

He fired again.

The movement ceased as if by magic.

Cheyenne Charlie fired from the other side and the death-yell of a redskin rang out.

After that there was a dead silence for the space of five minutes.

"I reckon they've got enough of it," said the scout.

He proved to be correct, for though they waited patiently the balance of the night, there were no further signs of the attack being repeated.

They had lost one man, however, and this cast a temporary gloom upon the Prairie Pilgrims.

The dead man had no family, however.

When daylight came it was found that the attacking party were nowhere in sight.

An investigation found that fifteen of the villains had gone under.

Thirteen of them were Indians and the other two white men.

Wild was not long in discovering that one of the latter

belonged to the trio who had come so near to hanging Lively Rick.

"I guess they have enough of it," he said. "Well, we will move on a couple of miles and then halt and give the show. That will give the scoundrels a chance to come and bury their dead."

He had thought it not advisable to give the show to the Prairie Pilgrims that day on account of the death of one of their men, but the rest declared that it would be a good idea, as they needed something to cheer them up.

After breakfast the train got in motion and moved over to a point on the prairie about two miles distant from the scene of the attack.

Cheyenne Charlie took it on himself to watch for the Indians and renegades to come after their dead, while the rest of our friends got ready to give the performance.

Two prairie schooners were hauled up to the proper distance apart and then a stage was rigged of planks between them.

Canvas was strung over the top and ends and across the back, leaving a place for a dressing-room on the ground in the rear.

Then the curtain that was in the effects of the stranded show was hung in place and two flags fastened at the top to give a sort of gala appearance.

When all the arrangements were completed Lively Rick appeared on the stage and announced that the show would begin at half-past nine, and that it would last an hour.

Young Wild West was heart and soul in the thing now, because he found that his pretty sweetheart was so deeply interested in it.

While he did not know exactly what kind of a performance they would give, he made up his mind that they would get off something that would satisfy the audience.

He told the ladies to go ahead and put on any of the costumes they saw fit, and to be quick about it.

"Et and I will go on first and give them a duet as a sort of prelude," said he. "Then we will give the act we were practicing the night before last."

Of course they were agreeable to this.

The act our hero spoke of was on the plan of "Ye Old-fashioned Singing Skewl," and allowed them lots of chances to get in no end of original sayings and doings.

When the time came they were ready and waiting.

Wild tinkled the little bell and the curtain went up.

The audience was disclosed seated and standing about expectantly.

There was quite a number in it, too, and as Young Wild West looked at them through the little peep-hole that was in the rear canvas, he made up his mind to do his best and not make it a dry performance.

He wanted it to be as humorous as possible.

The song he had decided to sing with Arietta was an old one, and much depended on the way the singers acted their parts.

The costumes would add to the attractiveness of it.

Lively Rick made the announcement, and then the show began.

When Wild and Arietta appeared on the improvised stage they were greeted with great applause.

The Prairie Pilgrims had never seen anything like it before, and they simply enjoyed it.

Their troubles were forgotten for the time.

The many weary miles they had covered since they set out on the slow journey across the plains was obliterated from their minds, and they only thought of the present.

The gay costumes of the two on the stage quite caught their fancy, and when the performers courtesied to each other and began singing they sat as though charmed.

Arietta had a fine soprano voice, and Wild was no mean singer.

Their good voices, added to their graceful actions, made the song a success there on the boundless prairie, and it would have been the same before an audience in a city.

There was real merit in the act.

They went through it without a break, and when they had finished and made a move to retire, the audience would not have it.

Then Young Wild West found that he had forgotten something.

He had not figured on being encored by the Prairie Pilgrims.

But he was not to be left.

"The last verse and chorus over again, Et," he whispered.

They did this, but even then the audience was not satisfied.

They wanted more of the same kind.

Wild and Arietta had both seen the play of "Romeo and Juliet" in Denver, so when the applause had subsided somewhat our hero said a line or two that he remembered and struck the proper attitude.

Arietta knew what he was driving at, and she instantly answered as well as she knew how.

Then they held a conversation, making up the words as they went along to fill in what they forgot, and they went through the acting part so well that they "brought down the house," to use the expression.

For an encore they sang another song and then the curtain came down, the Prairie Pilgrims applauding loudly.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BALANCE OF THE SHOW AND WHAT FOLLOWED.

When Wild went off the stage with Arietta, after the curtain came down, he found Ike, the darky, sitting on a tub with the banjo that had belonged to the Baldwin Brothers in his hands.

Then he remembered that the darky could play the instrument fairly well.

"Why didn't you say something about the banjo before, Ike?" he asked.

"I was done goin' ter ax you if I could play, Marsa Wild," was the reply.

"Well, you can go right on and play now. Rick, just announce that the renowned Ethiopian artist will now oblige with a little exercise on the banjo."

"All right," answered Lively Rick, and, walking out in front of the curtain, he did so.

It would be a funny lot of people, indeed, that did not like the music.

They cheered the announcement and waited expectantly.

When the darky appeared with a big collar around his neck and a red swallow-tail coat they burst into roars of laughter.

Then Ike settled down to business, and in just two seconds he had everyone in the audience moving their feet in time to the music.

When he got tired of playing jig-time Ike started in at singing.

Though he would not have received a prize in a competition, he could do it very well.

He rendered three or four Southern ditties and wound up by playing the "Essence of Old Virginny" and dancing it at the same time.

The Prairie Pilgrims declared that it was a great show.

They were more than pleased with it, so far.

But they wanted to see more of Young Wild West and his pretty sweetheart.

When the curtain went up again the singing school was disclosed to the audience.

The participants were gotten up in great shape.

The appearance of them made the Prairie Pilgrims laugh uproariously.

Arietta took the part of the teacher, and so well did she do it that even Wild was surprised.

The others did well, too, making the necessary breaks to carry the thing through to perfection.

When they thought they had gone far enough with the act they wound up by singing "Auld Lang Syne" in fine shape, showing that they could sing, in spite of all the awkwardness they had shown.

Wild looked at his watch and saw that it lacked ten minutes before the hour would be up, so he told Ike and Wing Wah to go on and amuse the audience in the best way they could.

The Chinaman needed no costume, and as he was perfectly willing to do a little singing and dancing, the two went on, after being duly announced by Lively Rick.

The act was the funniest of all.

Wing Wah did not try to be comical; he did not have to.

His shrill, piping voice and his wooden shoes were enough to fill the bill.

Wing danced so hard that one of the planks of the improvised stage gave way just as he was winding up the performance and he went down with a crash.

It was a suitable ending to the show, and it is safe to say that not one in the audience would forget it to his dying day.

"It was a great thing when we struck the stranded

show," said Wild, after it was all over. "I don't know when I have enjoyed myself so well as I have this morning."

"The same here," answered Jim Dart. "But I must say that Ike and Wing were the main part of the show."

"Yes, and to think I never thought of them at the start."

"I didn't, either."

"Well, since we have started in at the show business, we may as well study up our parts a little. Why can't we play 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' before we get to Fort Bridger? It would not take us more than a couple of days to study the parts."

"That's so!" spoke up Arietta, who overheard them. "There are a couple of dogs belonging to the wagon train that might answer the purpose of the bloodhounds."

"And there is a little girl who could take the part of Little Eva," said Eloise.

"And you would make a good Topsy if you blacked up," retorted Arietta.

"And you would do for Eliza."

"And Jim would make a good Marks, the lawyer."

"And Lively Rick would make a fine Simon Legree," said Wild.

"Well, I suppose I would have to be Miss Ophelia, then?" remarked Anna, with a laugh.

"Of course! You would be a good one for that."

"I think I could knock enough into Ike's head to make him play Uncle Tom all right," observed Wild.

"And what would you be?" asked Arietta.

"Oh! I could take the part of Eliza's husband, I guess."

"We could pick enough from the Prairie Pilgrims to make the rest of the cast," said Arietta, who was quite carried away with the idea.

"I think so," retorted Wild.

"Well, suppose we get right at it, then. We have the books to study the parts."

"Good! The sooner the better. As soon as we have committed the lines to memory we will have a rehearsal."

Arietta started right in to give the different ones their parts to learn, and when the wagon train started on its way they were studying hard as they rode along.

They saw nothing of the Indians and whites who had attacked them, though Cheyenne Charlie declared that he was certain they had remained in the vicinity of where the fight had taken place, waiting for them to get well out of sight, so they might bury their dead.

That night they reached the foothills of the Medicine Bow Mountains, and they camped in a grove of pines on the bank of a good-sized running stream.

A good watch was kept, but it hardly seemed necessary, for when daylight came they arose to continue the journey.

No one had disturbed them during the night.

Wild was well satisfied that the halfbreed who had given his name as Simeon Dusty was one of the attacking party of the night before.

He was expecting another attack, for he well knew that

Indians are vengeful, and that they will wait until they got a good chance to accomplish their foul purpose.

But he meant to give them more than they bargained for if they did make another attack.

The most tedious part of the journey had now come.

At that time the trail that went over the mountains was a winding one, and it took two full days for oxen to reach the level plain on the other side.

But game was plentiful, so there was no danger of the Prairie Pilgrims who went that way of being without food.

At noon our friends halted on a lofty plateau that was thickly covered with stunted oaks.

Young Wild West noticed a craggy point above, so he decided to climb up there and take a look around.

It was no easy task to get there, but for a supple fellow like him it was not so much of an undertaking.

Wild was careful to keep his form concealed as he went up, for he did not know that someone might even then be spying upon their movements.

When he reached the crag he laid himself low to it and then proceeded to take in the surrounding country.

He could see three-fourths of the land that circled the crag, and as he moved his eyes around he suddenly espied a thin column of smoke rising from a gorge about a mile distant.

"Ah!" he thought. "There is where they are. Now, if I could only catch a glimpse of the rascals and see how many there are of them, then we could very easily fix up a plan of action."

He remained up there for perhaps five minutes without seeing anything more than the smoke.

But just as he was going to turn to go down he suddenly saw a prairie schooner drawn by a yoke of oxen appear in sight at a point less than half a mile below the spot where the smoke arose from.

Another, and still another came in sight!

But that was all the wagons, though there were half a dozen men riding on horseback coming along with them.

It was a small wagon train following the winding trail that our friends had so lately traversed.

The smoke from a campfire was rising from a point not more than a hundred yards from the trail, and Wild waited to see what would happen when the little band of Prairie Pilgrims passed it.

He had not long to wait.

The three wagons and the mounted men had just about got well past it when a volley of rifle-shots rang out!

The oxen were put on a run and the three prairie schooners got a lively move on.

Young Wild West got down from the crag in haste.

Those in the camp below him had heard the shots, but they were at a loss as to which direction they had come from.

"A dozen of you mount and follow me as quick as you can do it!" cried our hero. "Come, Charlie, Jim and Rick! Get a move on you!"

It was but the work of a minute for them to get the saddles on their horses and snap the bits in their mouths.

Then they mounted and rode down the trail, Wild leading the way on his magnificent sorrel.

In exactly two minutes they came in sight of the three wagons and the mounted men.

It was just then that another volley rang out, followed by the warwhoop of a number of Indians.

The fleeing band returned the fire, but kept right on trying to get away.

Then Young Wild West waved his hat and shouted: "To the rescue, boys! Show the redskins no quarter!"

A loud cheer went up from his followers, and, hearing it, the fleeing band of emigrants came to a halt and made a stand against their pursuers.

It had taken the Indians a minute, perhaps, to mount and give pursuit after the first volley had been fired.

That had given the Prairie Pilgrims a little chance to make ready for them.

As Young Wild West and his men swung around a bend and joined them, the pursuers, who were less than a hundred yards away, came to an abrupt halt.

"Give it to them, boys!"

As our hero uttered the command a score of rifles emitted a burst of flame and a rattling report rang out.

"Charge them!"

This was the next command.

In one quick glance Wild had noticed that there were a few whites among the Indians, who, perhaps, numbered twenty-five.

Crack—crack—crac-c-c-k!

It was a fierce volley that was fired into the attacking party, and they fell right and left.

Then, Indian-like, they turned and fled for cover.

"Chase them up, boys, and give them something to remember!" shouted Young Wild West.

They did chase them up.

They kept hot after them for five minutes, firing every time they got a chance.

The result was that by the time the allies got away they had lost about half their men.

Then Wild rode back to the three prairie schooners.

The men thanked our friends warmly and the few women who were with them cried with joy.

That they had been saved from almost certain death they well knew.

Young Wild West and his friends had arrived just in the nick of time.

Wild soon learned that the Prairie Pioneers were a band of Mormon converts on the way to Salt Lake City.

But that made no difference. Their lives had been in jeopardy, and it was Young Wild West's motto to always take the part of the under dog, especially when he was in the right.

After a few minutes' conversation the Mormons decided to accept the invitation to proceed on the journey in conjunction with our friends and the Prairie Pilgrims.

Missing Page

Missing Page

Missing Page

Missing Page

They could both understand him very well, and they did as directed.

They had no sooner done so than Wild put one of his revolvers in the holster and quickly removed the weapons from their belts.

There was a lariat on the ground, coiled and ready for use, and, picking this up, our hero threw the noose over the heads of the two and drew it taut about their necks.

"Don't move!" cautioned Wild. "If you do you will go to the happy hunting-grounds so quick that you won't know how you got there!"

The red rascals never moved.

Neither did they open their lips.

They knew that they were on the verge of death, and that the only way to save themselves was to do as the daring boy bid them.

Wild now wound the lariat tightly about their bodies.

Around he went with it until he came to their knees.

Then he made a knot.

With the remainder of it he tied their wrists together, after he made them place them in position.

Then he tore two pieces from a blanket and gagged them.

All this did not take five minutes, and when it was accomplished Wild gave the bound redskins a push and sent them to the ground.

They struggled a little after they went down, but finding that they were helplessly bound, they lay still.

Young Wild West now turned his attention to the girl.

It was but the work of a moment for him to liberate her.

Then he lifted her up and found that she was unconscious.

But she had only fainted.

He was well experienced in such cases, so he did not stop to revive her, but hastened away with her in his arms.

The girl was quite heavy, but Wild wanted to get her on the other side of the pass before he took a rest.

Being strong and active, he could carry her much easier than an ordinary man could have done.

He pushed his way through the bushes as rapidly as possible, making little or no noise during his progress.

He was now almost certain that the Indians and renegades had gone to the pass to wait for a searching party to look for the girl, so he was compelled to make a detour so as to be sure and not come in contact with them.

It was about five minutes when he reached the place where he wanted to get.

Then he paused to take a rest.

Just then the girl opened her eyes.

"Don't make a sound!" he whispered, pressing his hand over her mouth. "You are saved! It is I, Young Wild West, who has got you. If you make the least noise our enemies will hear it and come rushing at us."

A tremor passed through the girl's frame and then she became still. "Oh!" she murmured, as our hero removed his hand from her mouth. "It is awful! Where am I?"

"Keep quiet," repeated Wild. "Are you able to walk?"

"Yes," came the answer.

"Come on, then. I will assist you."

Taking her arm, he hurried her along as fast as he could.

He had not gone far when he heard footsteps coming along the trail from the direction of their camp.

"Here come our friends," he whispered. "You will be perfectly safe now."

The next minute they met Cheyenne Charlie, Jim Dart and the men who had been selected by Jim.

The girl's father was among them, and he promptly took charge of her.

Wild told him to take her back to the camp, which he promptly did.

"Now," said our hero, turning to the rest, "we will go on and give the Indians and their villainous white friends a fight. But we must not go through the pass below here!"

A murmur went up from the men, indicating that they were ready to do as the young deadshot directed them.

Then, with Wild in the lead, they marched slowly down the trail in the direction of the narrow little pass.

But they were not going to walk into any trap!

CHAPTER IX.

THE PLAY IS GIVEN.

When Wild got to within a dozen feet of the commencement of the narrow place he held up his hand for his followers to halt.

They did so instantly.

Then he stooped and found a stone about the size of an egg.

Without a word as to what he was doing it for, he threw the stone with all his might at a pile of bushes on the top of the bank a hundred feet from where they stood.

As the missile landed with a crash in the bushes a yell of pain went up.

He had hit someone!

"Let a volley go!" he exclaimed.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when a dozen rifles spoke.

Then a wild yell sounded and our friends retreated around a bend.

The trap laid out by Sim Dusty had failed to work!

"Come on, boys!" said Wild, leading the way up the slanting bank. "We have started them, now we must keep them going!"

The men rushed after him in reckless determination.

They could hear the Indians crashing through the bushes and they kept firing.

A few answering shots sounded, but the bullets flew too high, so they were not in the least checked.

Wild and his two partners were not wasting any shots now.

They did not fire unless they caught sight of a man.

They kept on advancing, and the next minute they found that the villains had taken to the trail below.

Crack! Crack-crack-crack!

The shooting was going on from both sides now, but Sky Face, the chief, and Sim Dusty were leading their men to the cover of some rocks a hundred feet distant.

As soon as they reached them they halted and made a stand.

Not caring to risk losing any of his men by making a rush for them, Wild advised that they go back to their camp.

He was satisfied that at least half a dozen of the enemy had fallen in the short fight, and that meant a big victory for them.

He knew their numbers must be dwindling down so low that they would hardly dare to attack them again.

When he gave the word to go back no one raised any objections.

Some of the men from the train would have gone right on, however, regardless of the consequences.

They went back to the camp without a man having received so much as a scratch.

"It is a shame that the young fellow was killed in such a cowardly way," said Wild. "But I guess his death has been avenged."

"Hardly!" spoke up one of the men. "We must drop more of ther varmints afore I'll be satisfied."

"Well, if they keep on follerin' us I reckon there won't be any of 'em left by ther time we git to Fort Bridger," observed Cheyenne Charlie, with a grim smile.

What happened put quite a damper on the spirits of those in the camp.

The night passed quietly enough, and the next morning as soon as breakfast was eaten the body of the unfortunate young man was laid at rest beneath a pine tree.

Then the wagon train got in motion and the Prairie Pilgrims and Young Wild West's party proceeded on their way, followed closely by the band of Mormon converts.

When noon came the discussion of the show began again.

After dinner the company went off in a little glade and had a rehearsal.

This held them over for a couple of hours, but the Prairie Pilgrims did not seem to mind it.

They were all anxious to see the play when it was produced, and none of them interfered with the rehearsals.

When the rehearsal was through Wild came to the conclusion that it would do to announce that the play of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" would be given by the members of the company who had taken up the stranded show on the afternoon of the second day following.

As soon as he had given it out there was great excitement among the Prairie Pilgrims.

What they had already seen was enough to put them on the feather edge of expectancy.

Their journey was one of plain sailing the balance of the day.

Plenty of game was shot as they rode along, though they did not kill any more than they could use.

When they halted that night the boundless prairie was before them.

The only fear Young Wild West had of Sim Dusty and the gang he was associated with was that they might fall in with some more men of their own stripe and thus increase their strength.

He knew they would hardly dare to attack them again with their present numbers.

He kept a double watch that night and no one ventured to stray from the camp.

What had happened the night before had taught them a lesson.

Millie Copeland, the girl who had been carried off by the villains, was almost broken-hearted over the death of her lover.

But all hands tried to cheer her up and they partially succeeded after awhile.

Nothing disturbed them that night, and the next morning they set out again on their way.

Wild figured that they would about reach Fort Bridger on Sunday, which was yet three days off.

It was doubtful if the Indians would follow them much closer to the fort, he thought, but it was possible that they would make a final effort to get revenge for the losses they had incurred before the next morning.

This was only possible, but Wild figured to be on the safe side.

But the day passed, and though they kept a good lookout in every direction, not a soul was seen, either red or white.

And so it was that night.

The morning of the day on which the great show was to take place dawned bright and clear.

All hands were up early, for they knew what was coming, and those who were to take part in giving the play were just as much interested as though they were going to give a sample of what they could do, with the expectation of being engaged at high salaries.

It was Friday—an unlucky day, so some of the Prairie Pilgrims said—but Young Wild West and the majority of his friend did not hang much toward being superstitious.

Cheyenne Charlie, Lively Rick and old man Murdock were a little bit inclined that way, but they always gave in to what Wild said.

They had now reached that portion of level prairie land that lies to the eastward of Fort Bridger.

There is no more level a stretch in the United States than can be found right here.

Here and there at a distance of ten or twelve miles apart a group of trees might be found, looking much like an oasis on a great sea of green grass.

When they came to a halt at noon Wild took a good look back over the trail they had left behind them.

He could see a long distance over the level stretch, as the day was as clear as a bell.

When he had gazed for perhaps a minute he gave a nod, as though he had seen what he expected.

Some moving dots that looked like flies walking along the smooth surface of a table could be seen.

"They are following us yet," he said to Charlie and Jim, who had walked to his side and were busy scanning the horizon.

"That's right," answered the scout. "I kin see ther measly coyotes. But there ain't more'n a dozen of 'em, I reckon."

"They are coming to a halt now," added Jim Dart, whose eyes were as good as those of his two partners. "They are going to eat their dinner, I suppose."

They kept on watching for perhaps five minutes, and at the end of that time they suddenly saw a thin column of almost colorless smoke rising upward.

That satisfied them all that they had made no mistake about it.

It might have been a herd of antelopes, or a dozen other things that they had seen, but the smoke told them that they were human beings.

"Well," observed our hero, "I don't know as they will interfere with our giving the performance this afternoon. It is hardly likely that they will bother us in the daylight."

"Not much they won't!" exclaimed the scout.

The three said nothing to anyone connected with the wagon train, and when dinner was announced to be ready they sat down and ate with the rest.

As soon as the meal was done they went at work to get the stage ready.

As before, they erected it between the prairie schooners, but as they needed it larger this time, they placed two of the wagons on either end.

They needed a pretty good sized stage to enact the "cakes of ice" scene, and it would not hurt for the rest of the play.

When the stage had been put up by willing hands, poles were stuck in the ground on either end of it and braced.

Ropes were strung across from the tops of these to hold the scenes and a step-ladder that one of the families had brought with them on the journey was to be used to hold up the little girl who was to impersonate Eva when she was supposed to be among the clouds near the end of the play.

So hard had the members of the company studied that they had the lines down pretty fine, but as to acting before an audience, that remained to be seen.

It was two o'clock before they were ready to begin, and by that time every available thing belonging to the party had been utilized to make the seats for the audience.

At first the Mormon band had shown much indifference to what was going on, but by the time the curtain was rung up for the first act every man, woman and child of them had gathered to witness the performance.

Arietta, as Eliza, scored a great hit in the opening, and the Prairie Pilgrims applauded to the echo.

And so it was all through the play, each one sharing in

the favor of the crowd and Lively Rick getting all manner of hissing, so well did he carry out his part as Simon Legree.

Uncle Tom, himself, was a great character.

Ike had a deep bass voice, anyhow, and he was a typical darky, so there was not much trouble in him getting through his part.

When the play was finally over there was not one among the audience who did not declare that he would not be satisfied until he had seen it again.

So when Wild came out on the stage after the curtain went down and announced that the performance would be repeated on their arrival at Fort Bridger he was roundly applauded.

It was so late when the show was over that there was no use in going any further that day, so the Prairie Pilgrims arranged to stay there all night.

Meanwhile our hero and his two partners had been casting an occasional glance to the eastward between the acts.

The band that was following them had not come any nearer, but as nearly as they could judge, had remained in camp where they had built the fire at noon.

Shortly after the performance Wild called Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart, and said:

"Boys, what do you say if we take a ride back there and see what those fellows intend to do?"

"Bully!" exclaimed the scout. "I'm jest itchin' to have a little excitement. Ther rest of you have had your fun with ther show; now I'd like to have a little scrimmage of some kind, jest to git my blood flowin' right."

"I guess we could go back there and see what is going on without getting hurt," said Jim Dart.

"I will take the risk of getting hurt," answered our hero. "If we get hurt I'll guarantee that a whole lot of the crowd will get something worse."

Wild soon had his sorrel stallion saddled and bridled, and Charlie and Jim got their steeds ready.

Then after telling their friends where they were going, they rode off at an easy gait.

In five minutes they were near enough to their destination to make out that they had made no mistake in thinking a camp was there.

They noticed, too, they had been seen approaching, for there was just the least sign of uneasy activity about the camp.

A little nearer and they saw that there were only about ten Indians and the halfbreed and the four whites in the band.

Our friends held their rifles in readiness to shoot at the least warning.

But the villains showed no signs of being hostile.

They appeared rather anxious, on the other hand.

"How are you?" called out our hero, when they were close enough to the camp.

"Putty well," answered Red Romer, who seemed to have been chosen as spokesman. "Which way are yer bound, Young Wild West?"

"Oh, we just rode back here to call on you fellows, that's

all," was the calm rejoinder. "You haven't come across a gang in your travels, have you?"

"A gang?" questioned Red Romer. "No! We haven't seen a soul, 'cept you people."

"Well, then, it must have been you fellows who killed the young man the other night and carried off the girl from our camp!"

CHAPTER X.

SIM DUSTY'S PLAN.

The whites and halfbreed looked at each other when Wild said this.

"We don't know what you're drivin' at," said Red Romer.

"Well, I may be mistaken, but if you have met no one, then you must be the gang that did it."

Our hero and his partners were keeping a sharp watch on the villains, particularly the Indians.

They noticed that the red rascals were simply waiting to drop them by a few well-directed shots.

But Young Wild West and his partners were not to be caught napping any kind of fashion.

"You say that 'cause we was goin' to hang one of yer men through a mistake," said Red Romer. "You've got it in fur us, I s'pose."

"Yes, we've got it in for you, all right," replied Wild. "If you don't like it, you know what you can do. There are about fifteen of you here, why don't you start in to clean us out?"

"We ain't got no cause fur to do it."

At this one of the partners of Sim Dusty raised his revolver to fire a shot at Wild.

But he was not quick enough.

Crack!

Our hero jerked out a shooter and fired in a second, hitting the man in the arm.

"Someone else try that," he said, coolly. "You'll find us ready."

They must have thought it a good idea, for the Indians started for them with a rush, clubbing their rifles to beat them down.

Then some quick and sharp work followed.

The revolvers of Wild and his two partners cracked as fast as they could pull the triggers, while their horses jumped and pranced about in obeisance to the hands that held their bridle-reins.

It was all over inside of a minute.

The Indians quit and fled for the open prairie.

But they left half their number dead and wounded on the ground.

Neither of the white villains nor the halfbreed had taken part in the short battle.

They remained right where they were, not making a move to draw a weapon.

Young Wild West had charmed them, it seemed.

It was their chance to be revenged upon him, but they had not dared to take it.

But two shots had been fired by the redskins, and both went wide of the mark.

Young Wild West, Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart were masters of the situation.

The Indians had evidently begun to realize that they had made a mistake in bothering with the palefaces, for they did not attempt to renew the battle.

Sky Face, their leader, had been one of the first to fall, and that was sufficient to bring them to terms.

They were not thinking of what would happen when they were caught by the cavalry and taken back to the reservation.

It is more than likely that Wild and his partners could have taken them all prisoners right then, but they did not want them.

There was no need of their taking Indian prisoners in to the fort.

But if they attacked them again they would try and wipe them out, as they deserved.

"Well," said our hero, addressing the halfbreed and the white men, "I guess there won't be many of you left if we come together a couple of more times. Now, if you take my advice, you will light out for some place where you are not known and start in to lead better lives. You can do as you like about it, of course, but if you don't take my advice, just look out! That's all I have got to say."

The villains made no reply to this, and, wheeling their horses, our friends rode off at right angles, so they could keep a watch on them till they got out of range.

They made no effort to do this, so Wild and his partners rode leisurely back to camp.

But Sim Dusty and his men were not satisfied, not by any means.

Though they had been afraid to show fight when the three were there, they were more bitter against them when they rode away than ever.

"Say!" said the halfbreed, turning to his companions when the three had gone, "do you fellers know what was ther matter with me jest now?"

"No!" answered Red Romer, looking at him and shrugging his shoulders.

"Well, I don't know myself. But Young Wild West sorter made me feel afraid of him—I couldn't help it."

"I reckon you felt like I did—that you'd like to live a little while longer," observed McGinnis.

"No, it wasn't that. It was his eye what held me. He made me feel afraid of him, that's what he did! I'll bet if I ever run afoul of him ag'in—which I want to bad enough—I'll either drop him or go under myself!"

"Well, Sim, ther chances are that you'll go under, then. Why, jest look at what him an' his gang done to ther redskins!"

It was Red Romer who said this, and he pointed to the dead and wounded as he spoke.

"It was quick work, wasn't it?" was the retort. "I was

thinkin' of j'inin' in ther shootin', but somehow, every time I went to draw my shooter ther eyes of Young Wild West was right on me."

"It was ther same with me," said the fellow, who had been shot in the arm. "That was enough what he give me. I jest felt certain that if I went to shoot with my left hand I'd be a goner."

"Well, what are we goin' to do about it?" asked Red Romer, showing no little anxiety.

"Do about it? Why, we've got to kill Young Wild West afore he gits to Fort Bridger! You don't suppose I'd let a man live, after what he'd done to me like this, do yer? I reckon not!" and Sim Dusty brought his fist down on his knee to emphasize his remarks.

"How are you goin' to do it?" asked one of the men.

"I don't jest know how I'm goin' to do it, but it's got to be done, jest ther same. Jest leave it to me; I'll figure out a way. I'm goin' at it fur fair, too! I'll take ther risk of gittin' killed, too!"

The villain seemed to be awfully in earnest now, and his friends could not help wondering why he had not shown such determination when Young Wild West was there.

But they all had great respect for him, as he had proven that he possessed more nerve than any of the rest of them.

Pretty soon the Indians came back.

They had nothing to say to the whites at all, but proceeded to take care of the wounded and bury the dead in accordance with their customs.

There were but four of them left who were not disabled, and they were a rather sorry lot.

They hung around the camp for perhaps an hour, but it was useless; they would not even make a reply to his urgings.

The redskins had plainly had enough of it, and they were now repentant.

"Well, let 'em go," observed the halfbreed, as they rode away. "I reckon we kin git along jest as well without 'em. There's four of us, an' I reckon that'll be enough to fix Young Wild West."

Red Romer shrugged his shoulders.

"I reckon so," he answered, "if we git ther chance to do it."

"We must make ther chance."

"What do you think will be ther best way?"

"Sneak up an' shoot 'em," was the reply. "We kin pick off ther three what was here a little while ago right in their camp. I reckon if they was dropped ther rest wouldn't be of much account. We could make ther rest of ther gang believe that ther Injuns done it. You bet I kin work that! We could say that ther Injuns turned ag'in us, too, an' that they chased us away from 'em."

The other three men shook their heads doubtfully, especially the fellow who had been wounded by Wild.

"It wouldn't do fur us to ride away after shootin' 'em," went on the leading spirit of the quartette. "That would make it look as though we done it."

"That's so," said Red Romer.

"We could do ther business—say to-night. I guess I kin yell enough like an Injun to make 'em believe that it was them after ther business is done. Then we kin fire a few shots an' make right into ther camp of ther people, declarin' that ther redskins was tryin' to kill us, 'cause we objected to 'em shootin' Young Wild West an' ther rest."

"It might work," observed McGinnis.

"I think it might, too, when I comes ter think of it," spoke the wounded man, whose name was Hammer.

"It does seem so," nodded Red Romer.

"Work?" echoed Sim Dusty. "It's bound to work!"

It was now getting close to sunset, so the four villains proceeded to get their supper ready.

They could see the camp of the Prairie Pioneers faintly in the distance, and they, of course, knew that our friends could see them.

But they had no idea that they could see them plainly enough to note that the Indians had left them.

They cooked what they had to eat for supper and then waited for darkness to come on.

Sim Dusty was bent on carrying out his scheme as soon as possible now.

He had lost all his fear of Young Wild West as soon as the dashing young fellow got out of his sight.

And now he meant to shoot him when he was not expecting it.

"I s'pose they won't think of such a thing as our comin' to their camp to-night, after what happened," observed Red Romer.

"That's it exactly!" exclaimed Dusty. "They think we have got enough of it. That's why we kin have an easy thing of it. You're a putty good shot, ain't you?"

"Well, I guess I am, if ther mark I'm goin' to shoot at ain't too far away."

"Well you take ther tall feller with ther big mustache, then. He was ther one you was goin' to hang, so you said, an' I reckon you feel about like fixin' him up in shape. I'll take Young Wild West fur my target, an' McGinnis must draw a bead on ther other boy. There mustn't none of us miss when we fire! We will all fire as close together as possible, too. It wouldn't do fur me to miss Young Wild West, an' I know it!"

"I reckon it wouldn't," and Red Romer nodded, as though he could already see a picture of what would be apt to happen in such a case.

They talked over it for awhile, and finally all of them became convinced that it was the only thing they could do to get the satisfaction they wanted.

When it got dark they began to make preparations to pay a visit to the vicinity of the camp of those whom they now regarded as their mortal enemies.

The poor fools were not satisfied to leave well enough alone.

They saddled their horses and took all they had with them and mounted.

"Now," said Sim Dusty, "we will ride up as close as dare to, an' then we'll leave our horses with Hamm—orce. we do ther shootin'. As soon as he hears us

begin to yell an' hurry along with ther nags to meet us—fur we'll be runnin' back by that time. Then, when we do meet him, I'll begin to holler like half a dozen Injuns, an' you fellers kin let yourselves loose on yellin' an' firin'. Then we'll git on our horses an' ride to ther camp as though ther old feller was after us, himself! If that plan don't work I don't know what I'm talkin' about."

"It'll work all right, providin' we kin drop Young Wild West an' his two partners," said Red Romer, looking just the least bit doubtful.

"Well, you're ther one to attend to ther tall feller, don't forgit that!"

"I ain't forgot it, Sim. Don't think that. I want to drop him, all right, an' I want to do it bad!"

"Well, you jest keep that thought in your mind an' you'll do it. Ther same with you, McGinnis."

"All right," replied McGinnis. "When I pull ther trigger of my rifle I'll have it in my mind that it is either a case of live or die. I believe that, an' if I miss I'll expect to git a bullet!"

"Well, never mind about figurin' it out so' bad as all that. Come on! I reckon we all know what we've got to do, so there ain't no need of talkin' any more about it."

His companions nodded, and then they started for their destination.

They rode along at an easy gait, not making any more noise than necessary.

The ground was soft, so the hoofbeats of their horses could not be heard any great distance, anyway.

When within three hundred yards of the camp the three who were to do the foul work dismounted.

"You come on with ther horses on a walk after we git halfway there," said Sim Dusty to Hammer.

"All right," was the reply.

The wounded villain did just as he was told, and five minutes later, after he had gone as close as he dared to, three rifle reports sounded.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LAST MOVE OF THE VILLAINS.

When Wild and his two partners rode into camp after the lively time with the Indians and whites, the Prairie Pilgrims were anxious to know just what had happened.

They had been able to discern that something was wrong when the three were at the other camp, but they had not heard the reports of the revolver-shots.

When our hero told them how some of the Indians had been thinned out and what the halfbreed and the others had said and done, they were much surprised.

"I reckon they won't foller us any further," remarked Cheyenne Charlie. "If they ain't got enough now they're fools!"

Wild had seen just enough of Sim Dusty to know one of the persistent sort.

He was going to keep on the watch for the appearance of the villain at any time.

While the rest busied themselves around the camp he was looking over toward the camp they had visited.

And his sharp eyes told him when the Indians quit the whites and rode off to the east.

"Ah!" he thought. "That means that the halfbreed and the rest are going to fight it out with us alone. Well, I admire pluck, but not that of a villain who is bent on killing somebody. Just let them come! They are but cowards, at the most, and that means that they will do nothing openly. But I guess they will find me ready for them."

Young Wild West was quite certain that the villains would not follow them to Fort Bridger.

That meant that they were going to try and get their revenge before that place was reached.

Quite naturally it occurred to him that they might do something that very night.

If they did not they would have very little show to gain their point before they reached the fort.

Just as darkness set in our hero told his partners that he thought the four villains were up to something.

Charlie and Jim would hardly believe that such a thing was possible.

They both were of the opinion that since the Indians had left them the men would strike out for some other parts.

"Wait and see," said Wild, with a laugh. "They are too bitter against us for that."

"Well, I reckon they won't find us nappin'," retorted the scout.

"Not if we can help it," added Jim.

The minute it got dark Wild began moving around the edge of the camp nearest to the direction they had last seen the four men.

Noticing this, Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart followed his example and came over to him.

"You seem to have an idea that the scoundrels are coming here," said Dart.

"I have got that idea."

"Why?"

"I can't say, but it strikes me that way," and Young Wild West shook his head in a positive way.

"Well, let's go and meet them, then?"

"I think it would not be a bad idea to go in that direction a little ways."

"And if we catch them, what then?"

"Make them prisoners, unless they put up a fight, and take them to Fort Bridger with us."

"Good!" exclaimed Cheyenne Charlie. "But I don't think we'll see anything of 'em."

The three now started over the back trail.

They walked along with the utmost caution, keeping both eyes and ears open.

Presently they heard the sounds of horses' hoofs.

Two or more parties were approaching on horseback. That they knew right away.

And they were not coming very fast, either.

As the reader might suppose, the parties were Sim Dusty and his three rascally companions.

Wild and his partners threw themselves flat on the ground at a distance of twenty feet from the trail.

Then the four villains rode up and three of them dismounted.

What Dusty said to Hammer was heard by our friends as plainly as it was by the villain himself.

And before the three who had arranged to do the shooting from the cover of the darkness had fairly started, Wild, Charlie and Jim were creeping toward the camp.

As the villains proceeded rather slowly, it was not difficult for them to keep along with them.

Charlie and Jim simply waited to see what Wild was going to do.

They would be ready to join in the moment he acted.

When the villains were pretty close to the camp our hero arose to his feet.

His partners quickly followed suit.

The three men were less than thirty feet from them.

Wild gave a nod to his companions and then leaped forward like a shot.

"Hold up your hands, you 'sneaking hounds!'" he exclaimed in a low but impressive voice.

Sim Dusty and his villainous pards turned in consternation.

They saw three forms leaping toward them, and it was quite easy to note the fact that they were covered by shooters.

"Hold up your hands!" commanded Wild.

All the courage Dusty had boasted of left him as by magic.

Down went his rifle and up went his hands.

Then Young Wild West was struck with a sudden idea.

He would lure the remaining villain to the spot.

"Pick up your rifles!" he said, when they were close enough to press the muzzles of their revolvers against the heads of the villains.

"An' be careful how you do it," added Cheyenne Charlie, who, strange to say, had taken charge of the very man who had set out to shoot him.

"I reckon you've caught us where our hair is short," said Red Romer.

"Pick up your rifles!" repeated Wild.

The three villains obeyed.

"Point them in the air."

They did so.

"Now, then, fire them all at once."

The three reports rang out.

"Drop them and hold up your hands!"

It was like clock-work the way the three men obeyed the commands.

Our friends quickly disarmed them and then they heard a number of men approaching from the camp.

But they also heard Hammer coming with the horses.

"Run and meet the other rascal, Charlie," said Wild.

Then he called out to the men from the camp that everything was all right.

Cheyenne Charlie met Hammer and held him up in short order.

The scout hauled him from his horse at the point of a pistol and quickly disarmed him.

"I reckon ther jig is up, my friend," he exclaimed. "Come on to camp with us."

"I cave in," was the reply. "Have mercy on me! I'm a wounded man."

"Oh, we'll have mercy on you, all right! We'll see to it that ther rope that hangs you is good an' strong, so's it won't break an' spoil ther job. Jest take it easy, now."

This was not very consoling to the wretch, but he did not say anything further just then.

Charlie brought him and the horses into camp just behind the others.

There was no little excitement among the Prairie Pilgrims when they saw the four prisoners.

"How did you manage to git 'em?" asked one.

"Oh! it was quite easy," answered our hero. "I had a sort of presentiment that they would follow us up. They had planned to sneak up to our camp and shoot Charlie, Jim and myself. But it didn't work."

"No, it didn't work!" exclaimed Sim Dusty, vengefully. "I'm sorry it didn't, though."

"Well, there's no need of your being sorry," spoke up the scout. "You'd better be glad, 'cause when your neck is stretched you won't have so much on your mind, then."

"My neck ain't stretched yet!"

There was considerable defiance in the rascal's manner when he said this.

"But I reckon it will be as soon as we git to Fort Bridger."

"I don't think it is necessary to wait till then," spoke up the father of the young man who had been killed. "We kin do it now, for that matter."

"Of course we kin!" spoke up another of the Prairie Pilgrims.

Young Wild West saw that there was likely to be a strong tendency among the men to lynch the prisoners, and he did not want this done.

Though he knew they were well deserving of it, he thought it best to let the authorities at the fort deal with them.

That hanging or being shot would be their end, anyhow, he had no doubt.

"I guess we had better take them to the fort," he said, turning to the crowd.

No one raised any objections after they heard this.

They looked upon the boy as their leader, and what he said was bound to go.

The villains were tied so it would be an impossibility to get loose without being aided by someone and then the affairs of the camp gradually drifted back to their normal state.

The subject of the play came up then with full force.

The members of the company were eager to give it again, and they were anxious to get to Fort Bridger.

That evening they talked over the mistakes they had made and had a better understanding of how they were to act the next time.

"We will give a longer performance when we arrive at Fort Bridger," said Wild. "We will introduce a few specialties before we render the play. I think Ike and Wing Wah will be able to amuse any crowd that might come to see the show."

"I reckon so," said Cheyenne Charlie. "They can't help makin' people laugh, even when they're serious."

The scout had his way of thinking about such matters, even if he did not take a whole lot of stock in the show.

The next morning they started bright and early for their destination.

Wild was of the opinion that they ought to arrive there by night.

The prisoners were kept under a strict watch as they proceeded on their way.

The Prairie Pilgrims did not want them to get away any more than Wild and his friends did.

About an hour before sunset Cheyenne Charlie sighted the fort.

As he gave it out a glad cry went up from the travelers.

It was just then that a man belonging to the Mormon band rode up alongside the wagon that the prisoners were in.

He had been there several times during the day, and it was quite evident that he had some object in hanging around the wagon.

The fact of the matter was that Red Romer had offered him all the money he had if he would set them free.

The Mormon convert was not well off in the world's goods; neither was he what might be called an honest man and true to his convictions.

He needed some money to put himself on a footing with some of the rest of his companions.

The man had thought the matter over carefully, and now, just as they were in sight of Fort Bridger, he had come to the conclusion to accept the bribe and let the prisoners go.

There could not have been a better time than this for him to act, for almost everyone was riding forward to get a view of the fort and settlement near it.

The Mormon rode up to the back of the wagon, and, slitting the curtain that came down over it, reached inside.

He peeped through the rent at the same time.

Red Romer was right near to him, and he quickly cut the bonds that held his hands together.

"Give me the money, quick!" he whispered.

"All right!" was the reply. "Where are our horses?"

"I'll get them for you. Give me the money!"

Red Romer quickly complied with his request, and, stuffing it in his pockets, the rascally Mormon rode along to where the horses were hitched to the back of another wagon and cut them loose.

He halted each one of them as he did this, so when the villains jumped out of the back of the wagon they could run back to them and mount and ride away.

It was done very neatly and quickly.

As might be supposed, the four prisoners were not long in getting loose.

Then they jumped out of the rear of the prairie schooner and made for their horses.

They reached them and mounted just as Jim Dart turned and saw them.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

"The prisoners are escaping, Wild!" cried Jim Dart, excitedly. "There they go!"

Young Wild West turned as quick as a flash.

Sure enough, Sim Dusty and the three other villains were just riding off as fast as their horses could go.

"Come on, Charlie and Jim!" he exclaimed. "I guess we will take them alive, if possible. "Rick, you just try and find out how they got loose while we are gone."

"All right," answered Lively Rick.

Then Wild and his two partners started in pursuit of the escaping quartette.

Their weapons had been placed in the wagon with them, so when the villains had got themselves free they had grabbed them before jumping out.

They were riding for their lives, and each one of them knew it.

But they did not know that Young Wild West owned the fastest horse in the West.

They were to find this out soon enough, however.

"Whoopie!" yelled Cheyenne Charlie to let them know he was coming. "Look out there, you measly coyotes! We're only lettin' you live to show you how easy we kin run you down!"

Crack!

Red Romer turned in the saddle and fired at the scout.

The bullet flew high of the mark, however, and though Charlie wanted to answer the shot, Wild kept him from doing so.

"Not yet," said our hero. "Wait until we find we can't do it any other way, then we will shoot. But we may be able to make them surrender."

"I don't think so—not now," spoke up Jim. "I guess they are just desperate enough to die fighting."

"Well, they can do it, then. But don't let us shoot them unless they make it too hot for us first."

The four villains were riding bareback, but that did not interfere with the speed of their horses any, and they got over the ground with amazing swiftness.

But Young Wild West was gaining on them at every leap of his magnificent sorrel.

He held his rifle to his shoulder and was riding with the bridle-rein in his teeth.

He was not going to take any chances with the scoundrels.

Once Sim Dusty turned as though to fire a shot at him, but seeing Wild's attitude, he refrained from doing so.

On they sped, and nearer came Young Wild West, followed by his two partners, Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart.

When they were only a hundred feet in the lead Sim Dusty became desperate.

He knew that the time had come for him to do or die.

"Boys!" he exclaimed between his clenched teeth, "we have got to drop them fellers or they have got to drop us!"

"Yes," answered Red Romer, his face as pale as a sheet.

"Let's shoot, then, an' end it!"

"All right."

"Are yer ready, McGinnis?"

"Yes," came the faint reply from the man addressed.

"Let her go, then!"

As Sim Dusty spoke he whirled in the saddle and brought his rifle to his shoulder.

His nerves were at the highest tension now, and when he pressed the trigger he did not have Young Wild West covered.

As the report rang out he saw that he had missed!

He made a move to fire another shot, but it was his last.

Crack!

Wild answered the shot, for he knew it must be done.

Sim Dusty threw up his arms and tumbled from the saddle.

But his companions were only rendered all the more desperate now.

Red Romer and McGinnis fired almost simultaneously with their rifles and Hammer proceeded to make his revolver work.

But they all shot wide of the mark.

Crack!

Cheyenne Charlie fired and Red Romer dropped on his horse's neck, and after a few leaps of his horse fell to the ground dead.

Crack!

Jim Dart dropped McGinnis in less than a second later.

The remaining villain promptly threw up his hands and began shouting for them to spare him.

Of course they did not fire at him then.

He halted, and they quickly made him a prisoner.

"Now, then," said Wild, "you just tell us who it was that set you free, and be sure that you tell the truth about it."

"I'll point him out," was the reply. "Don't hang me, please!"

"Never mind about that. You point out the man who set you free, and I will send him back to bury the bodies of your dead companions. He will come, too! I'll guarantee that! I didn't know we had a traitor in our midst."

They reached the wagon train a few minutes later, and then Hammer promptly pointed out the Mormon who had cut them loose.

When he was accused of it the man denied it, of course.

But Wild meant business then.

He was satisfied that the villain was telling the truth, for he could tell by the actions of the Mormon that he was guilty.

"You go back and bury the bodies of the three scoundrels you set free!" exclaimed Young Wild West, sternly.

Then trouble started right away.

The rest of the Mormons took it up for their companion and quite a controversy took place.

Our hero listened to them for a minute or two, and then turning to them, said:

"That man is going to do just as I told him, or there will be trouble! If you don't want me to begin shooting, just let him go back and do it."

"We will withdraw from your company," spoke up the leader.

"All right. But you will do just as I say, too!"

"We will not do it!"

Wild whipped out his revolvers.

"Go back and bury the bodies of the three men we were compelled to shoot just now!"

There was such a commanding ring in his voice that the Mormons realized that they had better do it.

"Hurry up, now! I am going to remain long enough to see it done," our hero resumed.

Though it was much against their will, the Mormons went back and dug a grave sufficiently large enough for the three and put the bodies in it.

Then they covered it over.

"That will do!" exclaimed our hero. "Now you can strike out for yourself, but the fellow who played traitor had better look out if I ever run across him again. Goodby!"

Just a few in the party answered, but the rest said nothing.

Half an hour later our friends and the Prairie Pilgrims were at the settlement of Fort Bridger.

The Mormons came in a few minutes later and went into camp nearly a quarter of a mile from them.

The prisoner was promptly turned over to the commanding officer at the fort and a charge made against him.

It now being night, our friends prepared to rest until the next day.

But that night the Prairie Pilgrims got it noised about the soldiers of the fort that Young Wild West had bought out a stranded show, and that he was going to give a performance at the settlement.

Then our hero was bothered with questions from the commander down to the privates.

And the residents of the town became inquisitive, too.

So Wild announced the next morning that the following day they would give a three hours' performance in the afternoon.

The Mormon band did not wait over to see the performance, though it is quite probable that many of them would have liked to.

They proceeded on their way to Salt Lake City, which was what they termed the "Promised Land," that day.

Old man Murdock was well known at Fort Bridger, for he had lived there before he went to the Black Hills.

And so was Young Wild West and Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart.

They came in for a great deal of lionizing among the plain, simple folks of the settlement, for they were well known for their courage, ability and daring.

No wonder, then, that these people were anxious to see them give a theatrical performance.

More than half of them had never seen a theater, or anything like one, and when the time came for them to come out on the prairie, where the stage was erected, the same as it had been at the last performance, they hastened there, many of them carrying their benches and chairs with them.

Every soldier who was not on duty came also, so it was an audience that the Baldwin Brothers would have been proud to have had at any time in their career.

Young Wild West was taking pains to have the show to go through without a hitch.

As Lively Rick was to take part, he had coaxed Cheyenne Charlie to act as manager of the stage and curtain, and, for a wonder, the scout took interest in it.

Probably this was because he was in the settlement where he had spent more than a year of his eventful life.

Charlie was naturally a bashful fellow, and when he stepped out on the stage and announced that the first of the performance would be "The Doings of a Darky and a Chinaman," he was greeted with applause.

He then blushingly retired and Ike and Wing Wah came out, the former being dressed in a ridiculous fashion.

It was a great act.

The two went through with it even better than they had before, and the audience simply roared with delight.

But none laughed any louder than did the Prairie Pilgrims.

After the first act Arietta came out and rendered a song, which was encored until they repeated it.

Then it was announced by the scout that the play of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" would be given by the Young Wild West Company.

Some of the military men present had seen the great play, and they waited expectantly to see what the amateurs would do with it.

The very first scene showed them that they were not to be disappointed, and they applauded as much as the residents of the settlement and the Prairie Pilgrims did.

Arietta captured the audience completely, and the laughter at Jim's admirable impersonation of Lawyer Marks was great.

And so it was all through the play.

Eloise was a "howling success" as Topsy, and Lively Rick was hissed to the echo as the cruel slave-master.

Uncle Tom did his part admirably, and Little Eva simply made the women shed tears.

Our friends not only gave the full play, but they brought in a few specialties here and there, and this made it go all the better.

When it was all over three cheers were given for Young Wild West and the stranded show.

"Are you going to keep in the business?" a lieutenant asked Wild that night, as he was standing in front of the supply store talking about the show.

"No," was the reply.

"Well, I am certain that you would make money traveling around the country if you did," said the lieutenant. "I have been to a great many shows, but I have never seen 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' played any better on a stage as small as yours. I am not trying to flatter you any, either, when I say that."

"Well, if I was satisfied that we could play it as well as any company on the road, I shouldn't follow up the business," reported our hero. "The show business is not my line at all. Give me the boundless prairie, the craggy mountain heights, my horse and my companions and I am at home."

"What are you going to do with the effects of the stranded show?"

"I hadn't made up my mind."

"Suppose you sell the stuff to me?"

"Well, I don't know. Are you going to start a show here at the fort?"

"There are several of us who have an idea that we have more or less dramatic talent, and if we had that outfit we could bang away at the business to our heart's content."

"Well, you can have the stuff for just what I paid for it."

"How much is that?"

Wild told him.

The lieutenant promptly took him up.

"Consider it sold!" he said. "I will have the money here inside half an hour."

He was as good as his word, and when the rest of the company learned that the show had broken up they were not a little sorry.

This about winds up our story.

Sam Murdock fixed up the business that had brought them to Fort Bridger and they were ready to go back to Weston.

Before they went, however, Hammer was duly tried and punished according to his crime.

That ended the renegades who had made war against Young Wild West.

THE END.

Read "YOUNG WILD WEST'S LIFE AT STAKE; OR, THE STRATEGY OF ARIETTA," which will be the next number (80) of "Wild West Weekly."

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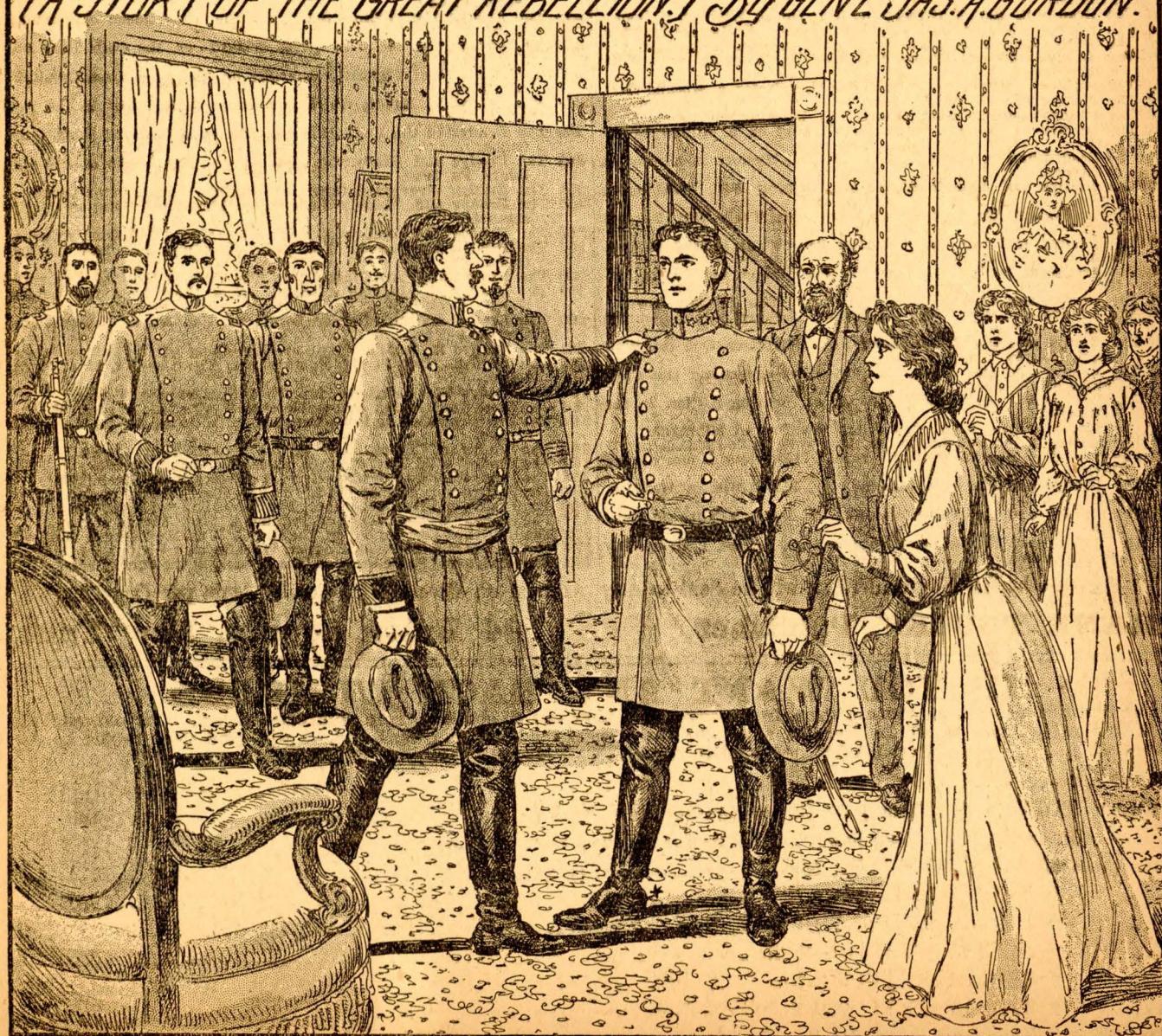
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